

Chapter 9. Pandemic Placement at Cuyahoga Community College: A Case Study

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Abstract: The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 created an exigency for placement reform at Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C), a multi-campus, urban community college located in Cleveland, Ohio, and its suburbs. These reforms were designed to accommodate remote administration of placement tests into the range of developmental and first-year composition classes offered at the institution, as it was not possible to continue with the current system of ACCUPLACER Reading and WritePlacer instruments without the availability of a proctored testing environment. The resulting system utilizes multiple measures—i.e., high school GPA and ACT/SAT scores along with informed self-placement and expert-reader assessment by English faculty—to place students in the most appropriate English course. This case study of the reformed “pandemic placement” system includes a description of the design process, draws on quantitative data on placement and success rates for students placed using the new system, and discusses responses from a qualitative survey of English faculty involved in the design and implementation of the system.

Cuyahoga Community College, regionally known as Tri-C, is Ohio’s largest and oldest community college and consists of four campuses and sites serving over 55,000 credit and non-credit students annually. Tri-C has the lowest tuition in Ohio, offers over 200 degree and certificate options, and runs more than 1,000 credit courses each semester. At the start of the Fall 2020 semester, approximately 19,000 students were enrolled for credit-bearing courses. The students who attend the institution represent a diverse demographic: Six out of ten students are female, and 40 percent are from historically underrepresented communities. As reported in the 2020 Diversity Report, students identify as the following ethnicities: 53 percent White/Caucasian, 23 percent African American/Black, five percent Asian, four percent Hispanic/Latino, six percent multiracial, and nine percent unknown. The average student age is 26.8 but ranges from younger than 15 to older than 75, and students are represented from more than 40 countries. In addition, 60 percent of students can be considered low-income as indicated by their receipt of Federal Pell Grant Aid. One of the college’s fastest growing student populations is students who dually attend high school and college; more than 3,500 students are part of the state’s College Credit Plus program at Tri-C (Cuyahoga Community College, 2019).

Tri-C has placed an extensive focus on improving graduation rates, and in 2019, the college increased its Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) graduation rate from four percent for the 2011 graduating class to 19 percent for the 2018 class (Cuyahoga Community College, 2020). Equity remains a concern, as graduation rates for Black students have increased but are still less than half of those for White students (Jenkins & Griffin, 2019). The college has focused on prioritizing IPEDS graduation rates through a wide variety of initiatives centered on retention and student success, including mentoring programs, guided pathways, first-year experience (FYE) courses and programs, and direct student outreach. These efforts are continuing to positively impact graduation rates for students, and the college ranks first in Ohio and 25th in the nation in the number of associate degrees conferred in all disciplines (Jenkins & Griffin, 2019). A multi-campus, urban community college located in Cleveland, Ohio and surrounding suburbs, Tri-C offers more than 500 sections of first-year composition and developmental English each academic year in seated, asynchronous online, and hybrid modalities that run for 16-, 14- or 8-week terms. In addition, the college began offering classes in a synchronous online modality, new to Fall 2020, due to needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. There are more than 400 full-time faculty at Tri-C, consisting of tenured and tenure-track faculty who are members of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). The English department consists of just over 40 full-time tenure-track and tenured faculty across the four campuses and in Spring 2021 had 85 English faculty who are part-time, contingent faculty assigned to teach courses. There are additionally 20-25 contingent faculty who were not assigned that term due to lack of additional sections. At the start of the 2020–2021 academic year, both full-time and contingent faculty combined were 84.7 percent White and 15.3 percent from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, 77.5 percent 40 years or older, and 67.6 percent female-identified. These faculty demographics have been constant since 2016. There are a handful of English lecturers (one-year full-time, non-bargaining unit positions) for the 2020–2021 year, but no new tenure-track hires were made at the conclusion of Spring 2020 due to the pandemic and its impact on the institutional budget. Further, there will not be any additional tenure-track hires for the 2021–2022 year.

Faculty roles are such at Tri-C that there is not a writing program administrator (WPA) at the college or someone who functions in such an administrative role as might be seen as a lead for the composition program or writing placement. Instead, faculty members take on additional service to the college in the form of committee involvement in addition to teaching a 30-credit annual workload, typically split into two 15-credit semesters. For many English faculty, this equates to teaching 4-5 courses each semester, as first-year composition courses count as 3.6 units, developmental English courses (integrated reading and writing) count as 6 units, and literature courses count for 3 credits towards faculty workload. Certain service responsibilities provide a course reduction in varying amounts towards

total faculty workload, including both shared college governance roles and the work typically associated with a WPA position at a four-year institution.

The collective group of full-time English faculty is known as the English Counterparts group, and this group's English Placement Taskforce assumed a leadership role focused on the college's placement research, recommendations, and processes in earlier placement reform in 2012 as a response to the creation of the Ohio Remediation Free Standards,¹ which were implemented in 2012 and codified statewide standards for college readiness that relied heavily on standardized tests, including ACT, SAT, and WritePlacer. High school grade point average is not currently included with a statewide minimum GPA for college readiness. According to the Ohio Department of Higher Education, the standards seek to "establish uniform statewide standards in mathematics, science, reading, and writing that each student enrolled in a state institution of higher education must meet to be considered remediation-free." Tri-C's English Placement Taskforce responded to these standards through an initial placement reform that adopted WritePlacer and ACCUPLACER Reading in 2012 (see "ACCUPLACER/WritePlacer" section in Table 9.1) because faculty desired to have students produce an essay as part of the placement process.

During Spring 2012, in order to implement these reforms, faculty serving on the Placement Taskforce led efforts among English faculty to identify placements for English that aligned with our curriculum and the Remediation Free Standards. We engaged in national research, pilot testing, and rigorous norming sessions to align WritePlacer scores with courses and curriculum. Our norming sessions sought to enact a process that we later learned was similar to an expert reader model to see which course faculty would place a student WritePlacer sample into to help identify our cut scores. This norming process aligns with Peggy O'Neill's (2003) description of William L. Smith's work distinguishing between holistic scoring and placement: "a key to understanding the validity research Smith conducted is to understand the difference between holistic scoring—a procedure for evaluating texts—and placement—the decision that is made about the writer based on the results of an evaluation" (p. 52). This shift to WritePlacer occurred at Tri-C before COMPASS stopped being available in December 2016 (Table 1). The transition from COMPASS to WritePlacer and ACCUPLACER Reading also marked a renewed focus on substantive placement reform at the college, including expansion of the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) corequisite model and a two-week bridge course, which had previously begun in 2011, and sought to provide more in-depth review of students' writing abilities and more authentic placement prior to the start of a 14-week term. The changes in placement resulted in a decrease of placement into standalone developmental English courses, as well as an improved success rate in the first-year composition course (ENG 1010). For English faculty, the work on reforming placement methods at this time instilled faculty expertise and involvement into the

1. <https://www.ohiohighered.org/college-readiness>

placement process, decisions, and evaluation at the college. The original Placement Taskforce still remains in the form of an English placement committee and consists of between six to ten full-time English faculty who monitor placement data and make recommendations to the full English counterparts regarding placement cut scores and process changes as necessary.

At the start of academic year (AY) 2019–2020, the college had been seeking additional placement reforms as a participant in the Ohio’s Strong Start to Finish Initiative,² the goal of which is to increase the number of students completing gateway courses within their first academic year. English faculty proposed a series of adjustments to placement processes, as well as curricular revisions to its standalone developmental English offerings—ENG 0980 and ENG 0990 (six-credit integrated reading and writing courses). At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting campus closures, the implementation of these reforms was under consideration by faculty and administration (Table 9.1).

Table 9.1. Institutional Placement Instrument Timeline

Time Period	Instrument
Before December 2016	COMPASS
January 2017–March 2020	WritePlacer & ACCUPLACER Reading
April 2020–present	Faculty-designed placement system

Pandemic Placement System

In AY 2019–2020, prior to campus closures, 3,194 students were placed using WritePlacer and ACCUPLACER Reading exams, which were administered on campuses in proctored environments, as well as at area high schools to determine students’ qualifications for College Credit Plus (CCP),³ Ohio’s statewide dual enrollment program. All administration of standardized assessments ceased in mid-March 2020 due to campus closures related to COVID-19.

The unexpected closure of all of the college’s campuses and the transition to online course delivery and remote work in March 2020 presented a serious placement-related dilemma. Because the college could no longer proctor WritePlacer exams in person in its physical testing centers and because no remote proctoring options were readily accessible, a system needed to be developed and implemented quickly in order to prevent a prolonged interruption to student enrollment in Summer and Fall 2020. Since ENG 1010 or ENG 1010-readiness is a prerequisite for courses across myriad disciplines, not administering the institution’s traditional

2. <https://www.ohiohighered.org/SSTF>

3. <https://www.ohiohighered.org/collegecreditplus>

placement tests was anticipated to have devastating effects. As was also the case throughout the country, students did not have ACT or SAT scores due to cancellations of standardized tests, presenting a kairotic moment to revisit discussions about placement, authentic writing assessment, and the expertise of faculty in determining where students could be most successful in their first English course at the college. While the discussion of using high school GPA for placement had been present for years, the immediacy of the reforms that took place in April 2020 was the result of WritePlacer and ACCUPLACER's Reading test not being able to be administered during a period of campus closure and statewide shutdown due to the pandemic as all services were forced into a remote environment.

A committee of English faculty composed of members of the English placement committee and counterparts chairs convened in late March 2020 to develop a proposal for what—at the time—was to be a one-year temporary placement system in the absence of proctored WritePlacer assessments on campus. The pandemic's institutional shutdown of standardized, proctored testing had afforded us the opportunity to enact our own assessment tool, which Richard Haswell and Susan Wyche-Smith (1994) had been calling for more than two decades prior when they recognized that teachers should be leery of tools others made and instead that they “should, and can, make their own” (p. 221). Over the course of the ensuing four to five weeks, these faculty collaborated with college leadership and testing center staff to design and implement a fully remote system that would eliminate the need for either in-person or remote exam proctoring. While the timing of this in the middle of a semester definitely posed institutional challenges, it afforded the opportunity for rethinking placement at the college to better align with best practices in the field, which eschew reliance on high-stakes standardized assessments and move towards multiple measures and directed self-placement methods (Klausman et al., 2016).

Placement Ideology

Writing placement, as noted by other scholars, plays a critical role at two-year colleges of opening or closing doors to economic opportunity, personal or professional advancement, or education in any form; thus, the implications of placement decisions on these students specifically are finally beginning to receive attention deserved in the field (Toth et al., 2019). As such, a growing body of research indicates that high school GPA is strongly predictive of success in college courses (Allensworth & Clark, 2020; Vinaja, 2016).

Further, discussion of writing placement at two-year colleges centers on fairness, equity, and the local setting surrounding placement decisions. While supportive of multiple measures, Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano encourage community colleges to proceed with some caution when using high school GPA for direct placement in English due to the diverse nature of student populations with regard to limited college preparatory coursework and also call for placement

to be aligned with local curriculum and pedagogy in the teaching of writing (Gilman et al., 2019). For these reasons, Tri-C opted to develop a system for placement assessment using high school GPA and high-stakes assessments in combination with both directed self-placement (DSP) and expert reader assessment models. The latter methods allow for refinement of the placement assessment process, specifically for students who might benefit from either a corequisite course in addition to the gateway course or an honors version of the gateway course.

Pandemic System Design

After numerous collaborative sessions, the team of placement committee members and faculty leaders devised a system that combines multiple measures assessment (MMA) and directed self-placement (DSP). Multiple measures assessment includes standardized college entrance exam scores, i.e., ACT and SAT, and high school grade point average to place students into English courses and self-directed placement along specific pathways (corequisite models and honors). These measures would be confirmed through transcript and test score submission to the college’s Registrar’s office as part of the admission process. Students are requested to submit these materials at the point of admission and enrollment in a program of study.

In addition, some incoming students could have placement waived if they met minimum criteria in other ways. For example, students may not be required to take the English placement test if they present at the point of admissions with an earned degree (associate’s, bachelor’s, or higher), a grade of C or better in college-level English from an accredited institution of higher learning, successful (C or better) completion of developmental English within the last two years at another Ohio community college or university, satisfactory standardized test scores, satisfactory high school grade point average (GPA), or English placement test scores from Tri-C (Table 9.2). Prior placements using pre-pandemic approaches were identified as remaining valid for two years from the original date of testing or high school graduation.

Table 9.2. Measures Correlated to English Course Placement

English Measure	GPA or Score Range	Placement
Cumulative High School GPA	3.8 and higher	ENG 1010 Honors
	3.0-3.799	ENG 1010
	2.6-2.99	ENG 0900 <u>and</u> 1010 or ENG 1001 <u>and</u> 1010
	2.599 and lower	Take English placement test

English Measure	GPA or Score Range	Placement
SAT Reading & Writing Score	570-800	ENG 1010 Honors
	480-569	ENG 1010
ACT English Sub Score	25-36	ENG 1010 Honors
	18-24	ENG 1010
ACCUPLACER WritePlacer Score	7 or 8 6 <u>and</u> ACCUPLACER Score Next Gen. Rdg 261-300 or Classic Score 90+	ENG 1010 Honors
	5 or 6 <u>and</u> ACCUPLACER Score Next Gen Rdg. 200-260	ENG 1010
	4	ENG 0900 <u>and</u> 1010 or ENG 1001 <u>and</u> 1010
	3	ENG 0990
	2	ENG 0980
	0-1 <u>and</u> ACCUPLACER Score Next Gen Rdg 220-300 or Classic Score of 28+	ENG 0980
	0-1 <u>and</u> ACCUPLACER Score Next Gen Rdg 200-219 or Classic Score of 9-27	Aspire Program (non-credit)

Students who qualify for college-level English with the help of a supportive course have the option to choose between pairs of courses, either ENG 900 with ENG 1010 (a two-week long Bridge⁴ + 14-week Gateway) or ENG 1001 with ENG 1010 (Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) model ALP corequisite +Gateway). Using the directed self-placement model (Toth, 2019), students are

4. The two-week ENG 0900—Transition to College English—course has been offered at the college since 2011 and takes place in the first two weeks of the 16-week semester, is a pass/fail course, and serves to allow more intensive assessment of what students can do as writers. The curriculum focuses on extensive writing and revision and mirrors the academic expectations of an ENG 1010 course with regard to compositions. Upon successful completion, these students immediately enroll in a 14-week, stand-alone gateway ENG 1010 college composition course or another course as determined by faculty assessment of an end portion. Since inception, the institution has seen a pass rate of greater than 90 percent in this two-week offering.

encouraged to enroll in whichever of these options they feel is most appropriate. Similarly, students who present at the point of placement with a history of high achievement as demonstrated by standardized test scores or high school GPA are given the option to enroll in either ENG 1010 or ENG 101H (honors version of ENG 1010). Students in both these categories receive course descriptions along with guiding questions in order to help them to decide to enroll in the best option for them (Table 9.3).

Table 9.3. Directed Self-Placement for Selected Courses

Course Options	Qualifying Measure(s)	Directed Self-Placement Language
ENG 1010 or ENG 1010 Honors	3.8 GPA or higher high school English Taken an Honors English course at the junior or senior high school level Taken AP English in high school but do not have test scores	What is the difference between Honors English Composition I (ENG 101H) and College Composition I (ENG 1010)? Honors classes do not involve doing more work than non-Honors classes. Rather, Honors classes have these characteristics: Smaller class sizes with fellow Honors students; May emphasize seminar-style discussion; Typically involve a “deep dive” into course material; May be theme-based; May involve individual or group projects; May involve extracurricular learning opportunities.
ENG 0900 and ENG 1010	Placement test score of 4 Cumulative high school GPA 2.6-2.99 WritePlacer Score of 4	If you answer yes to most of these questions, this option might be the placement for you: Have you ever written a paper of 4 pages or more using outside research? Did you receive mostly B's or higher in your high school English courses? Do you think that you would benefit from a quick “brush-up” before your ENG 1010? Do you enjoy reading and writing outside of school?
ENG 1001 and ENG 1010	Placement Test score of 4 Cumulative high school GPA 2.6-2.99 WritePlacer Score of 4	If you answer yes to most of these questions, this option might be the placement for you: Would you like to have more help from your professor to help you in the course? Did you receive mostly C's or lower in your high school English courses? Do you lack confidence in your writing or feel anxious about writing?

Students without either a high school GPA of at least 2.6 or a recent enough standardized test score are placed into a course based on a writing sample completed in response to a prompt, which is assessed by full-time English faculty members. The English placement committee designed the prompts and developed training materials for faculty assessors to place students based on their expertise and knowledge of the college's curriculum. Students who need to submit a writing sample through this process make an appointment through an online system administered by testing center staff. The appointment must be made at least 24 hours in advance. Upon completion of the appointment intake process, students receive an email with testing information, guidelines for writing the essay response, and a sample prompt. At the time of the actual testing appointment, a testing center staff member emails an essay prompt to the student, who then has two hours to return a completed essay to the staff member. It should be noted that this system was designed to minimize in-person contact at campus facilities. Each prompt includes a very short passage or quote (e.g., "When there's a setback, someone with a fixed mindset will start thinking, 'Maybe I don't have what it takes?' They may get defensive and give up. A hallmark of a successful person is that they persist in the face of obstacles, and often, these obstacles are blessings in disguise." – Carol S. Dweck) and calls for students to respond to a question derived from the passage (e.g., Please write an essay in response to this question: Can obstacles sometimes be "blessings in disguise"? Explain why or why not.). In cases where the passage provided contains a term that could require definition, it is provided in simple terms (e.g., A definition of *hallmark* is a quality or characteristic of something.). All prompts were designed in this format; the goal in the design is to be able to assess how students respond to the complex ideas set forth in the passage, while still offering a clear question for students to consider. This type of writing task is consistent with the curriculum of the first-year composition courses. These original prompts, developed by the placement design team, are rotated by the testing center staff based on the reader assigned.

Upon receipt of the completed essay, the testing center staff member forwards the essay to a faculty reader from a team of readers composed of full-time English faculty, who has 48 hours to assess the student essay and return a score to the testing center staff member, who provides the student with a score and applicable course placement information and enters the score into the student's record. The faculty member who completes the assessment enters the scoring data into a separate tracking system maintained by members of the placement team. Faculty are compensated by the college for scoring these essays; scoring is not part of the faculty member's primary responsibilities and is not release time eligible. To make the system accessible, email was used for staff to transmit prompts to students and for students to return writing samples, as the technology requirements for third-party proctoring (e.g., camera, high speed internet access) could make the process much more difficult for students. However, there is recognition by the faculty committee that even the utilization of email for this process may still

constitute a barrier for some students. To mitigate this issue, testing centers on all campuses provided limited on-demand testing on specific days on site where students could complete the writing sample using college computers.

Pandemic System Assessment Process

To prepare for the assessment of student placement essays, readers participate in a brief training developed and hosted by the placement design team to inform them about both logistics of the scoring process and assessment criteria, which are provided to the team of readers in the form of a rubric⁵ (Table 9.4). Sample essays developed by the placement design team for each of the possible scores are also given to the faculty readers to serve as a reference point for norming assessment processes. During the assessment process, there are cases where the faculty member is presented with an essay that they have difficulty scoring for a variety of reasons. That reader may contact another member of that month's reading team for a second opinion. In these cases, the two readers confer on the essay to determine an appropriate score, which at first consideration would align with criterion-referenced assessments, except that the placement course levels were originally normed by teams of faculty readers who regularly teach the courses, thus beginning the focus on consistency in scoring from an approach more closely aligned with expert reader models.

Readers also pay close attention to multilingual linguistic traits in student-submitted writing to address the possibility that students who were non-native English speakers may have taken the English placement test by mistake; to make these determinations, faculty readers rely on their experience teaching writing courses to both native and non-native speakers of English. Because the intake process for the college requires students to self-identify whether or not English was the "first language they learned to speak or write" to determine whether ESL or English placement is needed, there was some concern about whether students who may be ESL would select the English placement in error. In the event that strong ESL markers are detected in the student essay by the initial reader, the essay is referred to an ESL faculty member for further evaluation and collaboration between departments. This referral could result in the student needing to take a separate ESL placement test that consists of a grammar, listening, and writing component. ESL placement and English placement are two separate processes

5. In an effort to maintain consistency with the previous placement scoring system and avoid confusion among staff who were also working remotely, as well as personnel and staffing changes due to voluntary separations, retirements, and budget cuts, the same numerical codes were kept in place in Banner [information management system for student record keeping] but applied to the original rubric developed by the placement design team. Additionally, this allows for longitudinal data studies later comparing the old system (WritePlacer) with the new system (high school GPA or the departmental test) in more direct ways as both were normed to our curriculum and courses.

at Tri-C, and the two departments have separate courses and curricula. In cases where there is insufficient writing to complete an assessment (typically less than 100 words) or when a student exceeds the time required without an ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) accommodation, the faculty reader has the option of not returning a score and asking for the student to repeat the test with a different prompt. If a reader detects evidence of academic dishonesty in the student essay, the student is automatically asked to retest using a prompt specifically designated for this purpose. Up to this point, cases of this nature have been quite rare; there is not sufficient evidence to provide any analysis of what, if any, effect this practice might have on enrollment.

Table 9.4. Criteria for Tri-C English Placement Test Assessment

Score	Course	Essay Characteristics
0-1	ASPIRE	Essay lacks organization, development of ideas, and paragraphs. There is no evidence of a thesis statement (main idea). There are many errors in sentence structure, punctuation, mechanics, and spelling.
2	ENG 0980	Essay exhibits numerous grammar and mechanical errors (capitalization and punctuation) at the sentence level including sentence boundary errors (run-on sentences, sentence fragments). There is a lack of organization and development of ideas. Details may stray from thesis (main idea).
3	ENG 0990	Essay contains many errors in grammar, mechanics (punctuation), and sentence structure (run-ons and fragments). There is a thesis (main idea), but the essay lacks some development (details) and organization and may contain mistakes in paragraph structure.
4 ⁶	PAIRED COURSES	Essay contains some errors in grammar, mechanics, and sentence structure (run-ons and fragments). There is a thesis (main idea) and some details that help develop that thesis, but there are also a few errors in organizing those details.
5	ENG 1010	Essay demonstrates ENG 1010-readiness including a strong thesis that clearly answers the prompt, details that help develop the main idea, organized ideas and paragraphs that support the thesis. There are a few minor grammar and sentence structure errors, but nothing that prevents understanding of the central idea.
7 ⁷	ENG 101H	Essay meets all qualities of a score of 5. In addition, it exhibits advanced readiness in vocabulary, critical thinking, sentence variety, and richness of language.

6. Students with a score of 4 are placed in one of two course combinations (both ENG 1010 and a supportive course).

7. There is no 6. The score of 7 was intentionally chosen to be consistent with WritePlacer numbering so as to avoid confusion within student records and among staff.

Reactions

During the training sessions for new readers in Summer 2020 and early Fall 2020, many experienced and returning faculty readers shared their experiences with new readers. These responses often expressed the pedagogical value in the conversations among peers and further demonstrated a positive impact of the quick change in the system. Of the 44 full-time members of English Counterparts, a total of 18 faculty members served as readers throughout the process for at least a month. Of these 18, all scored essays for more than one consecutive month, with many readers—a core group of approximately 12—scoring consistently from May 2020–December 2020 without any months “off” from doing so. At this time, the process seems to be sustainable, as many faculty readers have found the work meaningful and rewarding. A preliminary call for readers for Spring 2021 has also demonstrated strong interest in engaging in this process, as a wide variety of faculty showed interest in participating—tenured and tenure track, as well as some that are not heavily involved in other service to the college. More than 20 out of 40 full-time faculty members have responded with interest to score for at least one month in Spring 2021. This level of engagement and dialogue among English tenure-track and tenured faculty in the placement process is unprecedented. Beyond engaging in consults and training sessions, readers communicate regularly by email to troubleshoot, engage in discussion about curriculum and teaching (often triggered by a placement essay or score), and through regular meetings of the placement team. The readers also are actively engaged in revision to prompts and other components of the process, even if they do not actively serve on the smaller placement core team.

Faculty readers and members of the design team who responded to a survey about their experiences overwhelmingly reported positive reactions to the experience of the reformed system. They noted enjoyment of both the experience of working closely with colleagues on the project and of the actual reading of student essays. Further, most respondents noted that the system was simple and easy to use from the reader perspective. As one respondent commented,

The implementation of the system was smooth and easy, especially because those instructors involved had long been desiring and discussing such a system. Personally, I found the system to be well-constructed and helpful to the user; it took little time to get used to and use correctly.

Designing and implementing these reforms during the pandemic was a collaborative experience among the full-time English faculty, testing center staff, and college administration. As one faculty member said,

The collaboration that happened between faculty, staff, and administrators was unprecedented. I’m still surprised we were able

to pull something together in such a short amount of time. It wasn't easy, and it took a lot of work, but I feel grateful to have been a part of something like this.

Another noted, "The camaraderie and collaborative spirit shared among the group of faculty readers were particularly encouraging, helpful, and pleasant." At a time when many experienced isolation and disconnection from the institution, this sense of connection identified by faculty readers is an important reaction.

There was not noticeable resistance as there was a shared understanding that a form of placement had to be implemented by both faculty members and members of the administration due to the direct relationship between placement and enrollment. However, there were some concerns expressed by other faculty counterparts groups (ESL and psychology, for example) after the changes were implemented just prior to the start of the Fall 2020 term. These concerns were primarily focused on questions about potential cheating in an unproctored setting, as well as some other discipline faculty members' perceptions of high school GPA as a faulty mechanism for placement. It is worth noting that even some English faculty had initially shared these concerns about using GPA as a placement tool. As one English faculty member stated,

I was extremely hesitant to use high school GPA for placement. After looking at the national data and seeing how other schools across the country have had great success, I felt more comfortable. Now that we're starting to see that our own data mirrors the rest of the country's, I feel much more at ease keeping this multiple measures system.

As this faculty member points out, the English placement committee responded to these concerns with national evidence supporting the use of high school GPA for placement and indicated the intention for continued monitoring of student success data as the semesters and year went on.

The college's ESL department also faced declining enrollment in AY 2020–2021 due to the pandemic and other factors stemming from immigration policies and national changes impacting international students, as well as travel barriers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. ESL faculty expressed concerns that pandemic processes were not adequately identifying students who may be better served by ESL placement due to the new unproctored English assessment tests, as well as concerns about potential academic integrity issues surrounding placement with ESL students. This led to dialogue and collaboration with ESL faculty seeking to further provide students with appropriate student-direct questions to identify whether ESL or English placement would be needed and the creation of a tool by ESL colleagues to aid ENG readers, if needed. In addition, the collaboration between the two departments also led to the development of a formal referral process between the two disciplines at the point of placement that would allow

the best placement decisions to be made based on collaborative assessment of ESL placement measures and ENG placement measures.

Conclusions

The college has been using high school GPA in addition to standardized assessment scores (ACT and SAT) and a departmental essay test for English placement for just over a year now. We have remained fully virtual for all testing provided and have not resumed on-campus placement testing on a regular basis throughout the pandemic, with the exception of a few on-campus enrollment days where students were permitted to walk on campus and take a placement test. However, for the entire year, under 30 students in total took advantage of this opportunity.

From May 2020–April 2021, the college completed 9,586 total English placements, across all measures and methods. Of this number, 53 percent (5,081) of placed students enrolled in courses (Table 9.5). We also saw 5,545 students placed into English courses based on high school GPA, with 2,523 of these students enrolling in courses.

We were initially concerned when we learned that 47 percent of all placed students did not enroll for courses; however, we learned that this aligns historically with college placements and admissions processing outside of the pandemic. For many students who apply to the college, we are not a “first-choice” institution; for other students, outside factors result in their decision to not enroll in courses after beginning the application process (employment, financial aid, family or caregiver obligations, etc.). We were concerned about this early on and thought the fully online placement process or pandemic might be negatively impacting student completion of the placement process or deterring them from starting. However, we learned that the loss of potential students from placement to registration is not atypical, and it is not unique to the pandemic or a change from previous use of on-campus testing with WritePlacer.

Table 9.5. Total Students Placed May 2020–April 2021

	# Admitted Students	# Enrolled Students	Measure
	4,025	2,546	English Essay test
	5,545	2,523	HS GPA
	13	12	WritePlacer
Total	9,583	5,081	

In addition, there were 74 instances in which a faculty reader identified a student placement essay as unable to be scored and requested that the student be given a retest. Most often, readers indicate that this occurs when the submission is too short to determine a placement. Students who choose to attempt the essay

test again are not part of the data termed “retest” as these students will have multiple attempts. In such cases, students are placed with the highest earned placement of all attempts. At this time, we have not reviewed the year’s historical data to see what patterns may emerge from retests that students take. A total of 17 students were referred by English placement readers to ESL placement for assessment, which we find to be a lower number than we may have originally anticipated.

During the first few months of the process, we found some instances in which a student was given a placement test but had already received a placement based on GPA or ACT or SAT scores. Therefore, during the month of August, which was our busiest month for essay placements scored (total of 834), we sought to engage in research to see how widespread the “leakage” of our admissions and institutional process was as a way to address it so that students did not take an assessment they did not need to take. We identified approximately eight to ten percent of the students in that month who already had a placement based on high school GPA, ACT, or SAT. Many of these students were those who had placed into our accelerated offerings—either the 14-week corequisite ALP (ENG 1001 and ENG 1010) or the 2-week bridge course—so we hypothesize that they attempted to retest as a way to place into a standalone ENG 1010 course. We worked with our registrar’s office directly to help develop direct messaging to students that either communicates a placement after the review of their high school transcript or refers them to placement testing. We have not seen a recurrence of this situation in later months.

Approximately 22 percent of all students placed into developmental English in Fall 2019, but as of Spring 2021, we are currently placing between four and five percent of students into developmental courses. Despite our transition from WritePlacer to GPA or a departmental essay, the success rates in ENG 1010 have remained within the ranges seen over the last five years (66-69%). The success rate for our gateway English course has remained constant this year—and while we do not know if this will remain in subsequent terms or post-pandemic, it is promising and worth continued monitoring. We also hypothesize that the use of faculty readers who teach the courses in the curriculum sequence could be having a positive impact on placement of students into honors-level first-year composition, which saw placements increase by 7.2 percent through the end of Fall 2020.

Emerging Considerations and Impact

We have found that there is strong value in faculty engagement and ownership of the placement decisions, especially in the use of authentic assessment as one of multiple measures. One faculty member said, “The key component of the system, faculty reading student essays, is the essence of authentic assessment; faculty who teach the courses are uniquely qualified to correctly place students.” As faculty have long felt frustration with finding students who were significantly

underqualified or overqualified to be in a particular course, implementing a system where their experience and firsthand knowledge is leveraged to find the best fit for a given student is quite powerful. Another faculty member described the relationship between reading placement essays and teaching in the classroom: “With so much experience in the classroom reading and grading essays, it was very easy to move into reading and placing new students into the correct courses for their skill levels.” As one faculty reader said,

We recognize critical thinking that may be hidden by typographical errors, often the result of composing an essay on a phone. Experienced readers know the difference between a basic writer⁸ and a student who may not have understood the stakes of the assessment. When we aren’t sure, we have one another. Standardized tests cannot do this, and the consequences of either over-placing or under-placing a student may be profound.

Another colleague reiterated this sentiment: “In many ways, the placement process not only allowed us to place students based on actually looking at their writing (instead of a computerized test) but also norm our assessment methods with our peers.” These faculty member experiences reiterate the value of a human reader who can recognize the affective components and potential of students that a computerized assessment recognizing algorithms and semantic patterns may not readily identify. During consultations, it was not uncommon for faculty readers to engage in discussions about the potential for success in a course that a submitted essay demonstrated.

Another identified ways in which participation has informed pedagogy:

I have gained insight not only into what students can do currently but what they need. Having this early access to student writing has informed my approach to the early weeks of the semester. If students are placed into the course that best suits their needs, and I am better prepared to greet them, then positive outcomes will follow. For this experience, I am a better writing instructor.

The first ten months of the pandemic placement process afforded opportunities for collaborative dialogue and direct faculty engagement in placement of students at the college that appear promising. As a result, despite the original pandemic placement agreement between the administration and union expiring in May 2021, an agreement has been reached to approve a one-year extension into the 2021–2022 year, allowing the identification and analysis of placement data,

8. The authors acknowledge that this is a contested term. To clarify, “a student who might benefit from additional support in the form of a developmental or corequisite course” would more effectively capture the intent.

processes, and faculty experiences in a more robust way before revisiting again in 2021. In addition, the revised developmental English sequence curriculum was revisited, and alternatives were proposed for consideration based on changes in placements and course delivery options. The past year has prompted an escalation of conversations among faculty and administration surrounding placement, largely as a result of a forced remote environment due to the pandemic. We now eagerly await more robust data from which to continue to revisit our placement measures, consider revisions to these measures based on student success and faculty member feedback regarding student success, and to investigate additional tools and platforms from which to continue process improvements.

Just over a year into this significant change in placement practices at the college, we await data from which to further conduct more robust comparative analysis regarding student success and progression into courses beyond those in which they place. The work has been informative with regard to placement practices at Tri-C and increased the involvement and engagement of full-time English faculty in the placement decisions of incoming students. We recognize that it is still early in the implementation of new placement measures and processes and that we have only a partial picture of the overall impact, as well as that, due to the pandemic, much of the data has to be analyzed in a limited context. Thus far, the impact on students appears to have promising implications that we are eager to continue to study, and faculty perceptions about the impact of the change on their courses appear promising. The unintended consequence of more robust faculty-to-faculty conversation about placement practices, expectations for students in the courses and teaching practices to further support students, and assessment of writing in general also presents significant further opportunities for research and directly impacting student success.

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