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THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACEMENT AND BASIC STUDIES: HELPING STUDENTS SUCCEED UNDER THE NEW ELITISM

ABSTRACT: *A new elitism and its (however unintended) theorists, the new abolitionists, seek to abandon the required freshman composition course and the placement tests that help students succeed in it and in college. This paper argues for placement into the course and is based on two sets of studies: a series of follow-up studies of Fall 1978 First-Time California State University Freshmen and a series of reports analyzing a four-semester overview conducted by the New Jersey Basic Skills Council, Fall 1984 to Spring 1989. As the data show, the effect of a placement program, followed by a careful instructional program, is to allow many students who would otherwise leave school to continue successfully in the university.*[1]

American education is subject to two contrasting underlying motifs: egalitarianism, the argument that everyone should have opportunities for success, and elitism, the restriction of opportunities to the most "deserving"—which often means to those from a relatively privileged home. At different times, one or the other motif is dominant. The social forces of the 1960s, which

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led to open enrollment at The City University of New York and to the establishment of this journal, produced a generation of egalitarian policies in higher education in general and in writing programs in particular. As we move through the 1990s, we seem to be cycling back into a time of elitism. Those of us concerned about preserving the opportunities newly opened to the poor and to racial minorities had best prepare arguments to defend these gains against both well-meaning academics and less-well-intentioned legislatures and governing boards.

The signs of what I am calling the "new elitism" are everywhere. Budget cuts are the most obvious, and public higher education has been suffering these cuts for several years. In California, the legislature has resolved to make up the decline in state support for public higher education by raising tuition gradually to one-third of the actual costs of instruction—a move which has caused a sharp drop in student enrollment. Every state has its own horror story, with education perceived by political bodies as an expense rather than an investment, as a personal privilege rather than a public good. Faced with declining enrollments along with tightened budgets, many faculties react, by seeking to restrict enrollments to the best-prepared students, further limiting the chances of the underprivileged, who are already hurt by the increased costs. Thus largely liberal and well-meaning faculties seeking to preserve institutional quality wind up allied to governing bodies intending to restrict the hesitant welcome that has been offered to those whom Patricia Cross has called the "new students."

College and university writing programs are on the front lines of this conflict, since their basic purpose is to induct entering students into the discourse community of higher education. These programs have served both egalitarianism and elitism in their turns. Since the first English Placement Test and required freshman course were developed by Harvard in the 1870s, English programs and assessments have been used to winnow out the "undeserving," often defined as those lacking the right dialect. During the 1950s, the huge freshman English programs of some public universities served in effect as a wing of the admissions office, eliminating those who could not measure up to standards. But during more liberal periods, and during times when sufficient funding could be found, these tests and programs served to help underprepared students succeed instead of washing them out. Thus the California State University English Placement Test, offered for the first time in

1978, was explicitly separated from the admissions process (only admitted students could take it) and directly connected to a basic writing program with special funding.

Among those attacking placement tests and required freshman writing programs these days is an influential group of writing specialists who call themselves "new abolitionists." A sympathetic history of abolition by Robert Connors appears in *Composition in the 21st Century* (Bloom, Daiker, and White); powerful arguments for it by Sharon Crowley in *Pretext* in 1991 and in *JAC* in 1995 summarize the modern case. Less prominent writing program administrators on the WPA e-mail computer network are widely sympathetic with abolitionism, despite its implications for their jobs. Neither Connors nor Crowley (nor most writing program administrators) consider themselves elitists; Crowley in particular shudders to think herself associated with them. Her 1995 article problematizes the concept of student "need" partly on the basis of lack of clear definition and empirical evidence: "It is very difficult to contest it without being written off as either an elitist, a troublemaker, or an insensitive curmudgeon. This is particularly frustrating because support for the claim is virtually unarticulated: no empirical studies have ever been done to test it, and historical research reveals reiterated but unsubstantiated statements of it" ("Composition's Ethic" 234-35). Arguments for abolition are based on genuine curricular concerns, sympathy for students forced to take "the universal course" for vague reasons, and deeply felt faculty interests, whereas arguments for maintaining the required course have been muted. Unfortunately Crowley is right about the claim that freshman English meets students' needs. Up to now there has been little published evidence to show that the course does any good for students or that placement, with its negative labeling of those with low scores, actually helps students succeed. Meanwhile, the required course leads to detrimental labor practices on the part of many universities, creating a subclass of teachers with few privileges, low pay, and no chance of tenure or advancement. The new abolitionists argue that it is better to make the whole business elective, so that students will be motivated to learn and the course will lose its curse as a dreary place for teachers and students to put in wasted time.

There are, of course, many claimed advantages for the required freshman course: the need to induct first-year students into the higher education discourse community, the discussion

and attention to student performance that are common in relatively small classes, the improvements every teacher observes in strong as well as weak students, and so on. And there are also many claimed advantages from placement testing designed to allow students to enter the composition program in a course that will give them a good chance of success.

Those arguments, seem unconvincing now, under the sway of the new elitism and its theorists, the new abolitionists. Nonetheless, if faculty and administrators could be persuaded that the required course and placement testing do in fact help underprivileged students succeed, they would be less likely to join those seeking to limit opportunity for them. These are the students for whom required placement and the required freshman course are necessary, for they are most in need of guidance and support and most unlikely to take writing courses they fear will confirm their inadequacy (if the program is not required).

This paper focuses specifically on the role of placement testing and instruction for students with the weakest preparation in writing, those low-scoring students most likely to disappear from higher education as we move through the elitist 1990s. By summarizing hitherto unpublished studies showing their importance for students most likely to drop out of higher education, I am replying to the argument that placement and basic writing instruction have little effect. I believe that we must preserve these programs if we are concerned about keeping the "new students" in colleges and universities.

This paper is based on two sets of studies: a series of follow-up studies of Fall 1978 First-Time Freshmen, produced by the Institutional Research Office of the California State University (CSU) from March 1980 to March 1982, and a series of reports analyzing a four-semester overview conducted by the New Jersey Basic Skills Council, Fall 1984 to Spring 1989. As the data show, the effect of a placement program followed by a careful instructional program is to allow many students who would otherwise leave school to continue successfully in the university.

The California State University Studies[1]

The last of five studies prepared by the Division of Institutional Research of the CSU Chancellor's Office is dated March 1982; it presents data compiled two-and-a-half years after the study population of Fall 1978 freshmen entered the multicampus system. The report notes "that marked differences in continuation exist among groups of students depending upon their par-

ticipation in the testing program and their resultant test performance" (2). As Table I shows, of those who did not take the English Placement Test (EPT), despite much urging, only 78.7 percent remained in school the following Spring; the basic writing group, those scoring at or below 150, continued at a 90.0 percent rate. When the data are compiled in Spring 1981, two-and-a-half years later, this difference increases: EPT non-participants continue at only 37.8 percent, while 51.8 percent of the basic writing group are still at the university. The continuation difference between the basic writing group and those scoring above 150 is much smaller.

Table I
Continuation by CSU EPT Participation
Fall 1978 to Spring 1981

	Non-Participant	Score <150	Score >150	All Students
Fall 1978 N =	1412	1156	1203	3771
Percent Continuation				
To Spring 1979	78.7	90.0	92.9	86.7
To Fall 1979	57.0	73.1	78.3	68.7
To Spring 1980	50.0	65.7	72.1	61.8
To Fall 1980	40.2	55.4	60.7	51.4
To Spring 1981	37.8	51.8	57.8	48.5

There are several ways to interpret these data. We could hypothesize that students who do not participate in the placement program are less motivated and hence more likely to drop out of school than those who do participate. There are, of course, many reasons for students to leave school besides inadequate writing ability. Nonetheless, it is striking that the basic writing students, those with low EPT scores and hence weak preparation for college writing, continue at only a 6 percent lower rate than the high-scoring group and at 2.7 percent *above* the average of all students. Placement program participation is clearly a significant factor in continuation in college for students with low EPT scores.

Even more startling is the relation between participation in the EPT and participation in a basic writing instructional program. I should note here that until the placement program began, the CSU was not authorized to offer writing courses below the regular freshman level. This did not mean that no

help was provided to students with writing difficulties; rather, whatever help that was offered informally by a sympathetic and socially aware faculty had to be disguised and bootlegged. With the inauguration of the placement program, special funds became available to support such programs. My perception of the curricular results of this historical oddity is that it had strongly positive effects. No entrenched low-quality "remedial" programs were in place, no undertrained and overworked teachers of such courses were on hand, and few bad rumors of "bonehead" courses existed on the student grapevine. Thus, the English faculties of the CSU campuses were in a position to institute a wide variety of enterprising and useful basic writing programs, including intensive coursework, [supplemental] mini-courses, and computer-assisted tutorials in a newly supportive environment in 1978. One sign of this vigor is that an estimated 146 students of those participating in the program who *passed* the placement test nonetheless took a basic writing course (Table IV, October 1980 CSU Report); this group, represented by 25 in the 1981 study sample, had the highest persistence rate of all: 96 percent in Spring 1979 and 64 percent in Spring 1981.

Table II
Continuation of Fall 1978 First-Time Freshmen Who Took a Remedial Writing Course
Fall 1978 to Spring 1981

	Non-Participant	Score <150	Score >150	All Students
Fall 1978 N =	82	209	25	316
Percent Continuation				
To Spring 1979	87.8	93.3	96.0	92.1
To Fall 1979	69.5	78.0	92.0	76.9
To Spring 1980	59.8	67.9	84.0	67.1
To Fall 1980	43.9	54.1	72.0	52.8
To Spring 1981	39.0	52.6	64.0	50.0

Campus differences in the data are significant but difficult to interpret. They relate in part to differences in the quality and efficacy of the basic writing programs, but many other reasons cause students to drop out or transfer from one institution to another (and the study does not distinguish between these two different kinds of events). One campus of the CSU showed a

decline of over 46 percentage points in the continuation rate of nonparticipants from Spring 1979 to Spring 1981, while a different campus (in a much more attractive geographic location) showed a decline of only 29 percentage points. On four large campuses (Fresno, Long Beach, Pomona, and San Francisco), the five-term continuation rate for the low-scoring group after completing basic writing instruction actually exceeded that of the high-scoring group.

The New Jersey Basic Skills Council Study[2]

New Jersey began its assessment and remedial/developmental programs about the same time California did and in part modeled its assessment design on the California program. But there are some important differences between the dimensions of the two statewide programs. Whereas the California program was limited to students admitted to one of the (then) 19 CSU campuses (the middle tier of public higher education, bracketed by the University of California and the California Community Colleges), the New Jersey program encompassed all public colleges and universities and included reading and mathematics as well as writing. Thus the New Jersey program evaluation considers 115 different programs at 31 different institutions, ranging from small county colleges to the flagship state university.

Despite these differences, the findings of the New Jersey studies are remarkably similar to those of the California studies. The three most recent reports are dated December 1988 (*Effectiveness of Remedial Programs in Public Colleges and Universities: Fall 1984-Spring 1986*), November 1991 (*Effectiveness of Remedial Programs in Public Colleges and Universities: Fall 1987-Spring 1989*), and January 15, 1992 ("Memorandum to Members, Board of Higher Education"). The most recent memorandum states that "the outcomes data indicate that on a system-wide level, remedial instruction is clearly providing the opportunity for thousands of underprepared students to succeed at college level work" (2).

The reports deal with many areas of statewide concern (such as policy administration and placement criteria) that are not directly of concern here. But the researchers also report on what they call "Remedial Program Outcomes" and "Subsequent Academic Performance" at the system level, issues exactly parallel to those of the California studies. The data show a high

level of compliance with placement testing and of acceptance of what the report calls "remedial placement": 95 percent of the designated full-time students were "enrolled in needed remediation by their colleges within two semesters" (1992, 6) and 74 percent completed all such requirements. Thus the New Jersey data do not have much to say about nonparticipants in the program but rather compare those defined by testing as "remedial" and "nonremedial"—groups parallel to the low- and high-scoring groups in California.

The four-semester study of the Fall 1987 cohort shows that "66 percent of the full-time students who completed remediation were retained compared with 71 percent of the students who did not need remediation" (6)—a 5 percent difference, very close to the 6 percent difference in the California data. Again, as in California, the comparison between those who did and did not complete the basic writing program was dramatic, a 43 percent difference: "For students who did not complete writing remediation, however, the fourth semester retention rate was only 23 percent" (6).

The most complete data on writing placement are contained in the study of over 10,000 Fall 1984-Spring 1986 students. At the county colleges, 37 percent of the full-time students (5,700) and 31 percent of the part-time students (2,055) were identified for "writing remediation" (1988, 178). At the state colleges, 31 percent of the full-time students (2,226) and 29 percent of the part-timers (367) were identified for remediation. At the Rutgers colleges, 15 percent of the full-timers (789) and 13 percent of the part-timers (14) were so identified. Almost all of these students were enrolled in the basic writing courses provided for them, and about three-quarters of them completed the sequence. When the researchers compared the retention rates of the low-scoring group that completed the course work to the high-scoring group not required to take this course work, they found that "students who completed remediation exceeded their nonremedial peers by one percentage point (64 percent vs. 63 percent) statewide" (178). As in California, identified students who do not complete the basic writing courses leave school at a much higher rate; their 19 percent retention rate was more than three times lower than the nonremedial students. The conclusion is compelling: "There is a clear, positive relationship between completing remedial writing and staying in college" (178).

Conclusions

We must be careful about generalizing from the California and New Jersey programs, both of which have similar well-designed placement instruments and an energetic faculty committed to assisting low-scoring students with their writing. In e-mail conversations on the WPA (Writing Program Administrators) computer network, informal reports on this subject show that we can expect variation in persistence data depending on variations in campus, testing, and instruction. For example, William Condon (26 Sept. 1994) noted that students in a foundational course in composition at Arkansas Tech "persisted at a higher rate (roughly 75 percent as opposed to the norm of 65 percent for other students)." But on the same day, Frank Sullivan wrote about a study at Temple University of the 1978 cohort which found that "placement into basic writing, on average, does not seem to affect student retention" (26 Sept. 1994). All placement instruments are not created equal, nor are all basic writing programs equally effective. Nonetheless, the California and New Jersey studies provide compelling evidence of what can be done to help low-scoring students remain in college. The remarkable similarity of the persistence findings despite vast differences in scope, geography, and level of institution suggests some stability of data and potential replicability.

At this writing, both of these programs are under attack, with the very survival of the New Jersey program in doubt. Expensive placement testing—and good placement is not cheap—is an inviting target for budget-cutting, and expensive basic writing instruction—which requires small class size and trained faculty—has few powerful defenders in the administrative meetings allocating less and less money for teaching. As in other political settings, the largely unrepresented underprivileged become an easy mark, and the resurging elitism in the faculties would just as soon be rid of the troublesome students that basic writing programs keep in school.

Those of us concerned about preserving the hard-won higher education opportunities for the new students may not be able to stem the elitist tide, at least not immediately. But we can present the data and the arguments for basic writing programs and force those opposing them to confront the social biases they are endorsing. The argument that our programs do not work is baseless, as the California and New Jersey data show; given adequate support, we can help most low-scoring students succeed.

Notes

[1]The divisions and offices that produced the data used in this article no longer exist so it may be difficult for researchers to obtain copies of the reports cited in this text. For the California reports, one can write to the Office of Analytic Studies, California State U., 400 Golden Shore, Long Beach, CA 90802-4275 or to the Office of Systemwide Testing, California State U., Fresno, CA 93740-0354. The New Jersey data may possibly be found at the Board of Higher Ed., 20 W. State Street—CN 542, Trenton, NJ 08625. If these efforts fail, write the author at the English Dept., California State U., San Bernardino, CA 92407 and he will have the requested reports duplicated and mailed at cost.

[2]See Note 1 above.

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