

# Crisis as a Catalyst for Change: Supporting Student Success with GSP and ALP During the Pandemic

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*ABSTRACT: University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College (UCBA) was actively engaged in an Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) pilot when COVID-19 struck, derailing placement measures typically used by the University of Cincinnati (UC) system. COVID-19 lockdowns united stakeholders around initiatives to enact a new placement process that had previously been dismissed because of the inability of incoming students to take ACT/SAT tests, which meant that a new placement process needed to be developed quickly that would work for all colleges in the system. The directed placement process was selected because of its emphasis on student agency and the speed with which it could be developed and implemented. This article examines the complicated factors and considerations in adopting the directed self-placement (called Guided Self-Placement or GSP at the university) across multiple colleges, each with its own range of developmental and first-year composition courses. In addition to enacting a new placement model, UC also saw a sudden growth of students enrolling in the UCBA ALP pilot, which required some explanation to make clear to students. The crisis caused by COVID-19 became a catalyst to create a GSP that supports student agency and expanded the growth of the once-nascent ALP offerings.*

*KEYWORDS: Accelerated Learning Program (ALP); COVID; Directed Self-Placement (DSP); placement; two-year college*

## INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to overstate the impact COVID-19 had on every aspect of life. The University of Cincinnati, like the rest of the country, was left to craft its own response to the confusing and expanding crisis, which shuttered nearly all services overnight. During (and due to) this chaotic uncertainty, the Department of English and Communication at Blue Ash College, an open access, regional campus of the University of Cincinnati (UCBA), fundamentally changed how it placed, structured, and taught developmental writing due to institutional shifts and the desire to maintain student success in a wildly unstable period.

But the pandemic also served as a catalyst for advancing numerous student-focused aspects of the composition program. Due to an expan-

sion of immediate needs, the global crisis opened doors for discussion that were previously closed but now seemed not only possible, but pragmatic. The global emergency united disparate stakeholders to craft institutional practices that could be more equitable than the methods in place before COVID-19. The crisis of a global pandemic provided a means to reevaluate and reshape the ways in which students experience college composition. Before the pandemic, Ohio required all high school students to take the ACT/SAT. Students who met minimum scores in English and math were exempt from developmental coursework. When the pandemic disrupted Ohio's "Remediation Free" process and the ACT/SAT requirements were dropped because of the difficulty in safely administering the tests, the university could reexamine an Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) and Guided Self-Placement (GSP) with new urgency. Now that the dust has settled, we have found that the GSP works nicely with the ALP, helping to support students in making solid choices about where to begin their writing journeys in college based upon their own prior learning and experiences, as well as their own confidence levels in their abilities, all while helping to close an equity gap that our program experienced due the prior placement and programming.

## Background

While this essay will primarily focus on changes we were able to implement because of the pandemic, we will provide a brief history of the

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University's pre-pandemic efforts to adopt a GSP and Accelerated Learning Program (ALP). Although the main campus and its regional campuses offer the same core composition sequence, each college designs its own curricular approaches to best serve its students. While largely similar, there are fundamental differences as well—for instance, all developmental courses are only taught at regional, open-access colleges. To address these needs, the composition programs at these campuses offer more course options for incoming students who may benefit from extra support for the required first-year composition course. For students enrolling at UCBA, in addition to the credit-bearing English 1001, students can begin with the developmental options of English 0097, English 0099, and the new English 1001 ALP. The developmental course sequence is designed to facilitate students' writing development through two standalone noncredit-bearing courses. The English 0097 course uses an integrated reading and writing approach as an introduction to academic literacies used in college. The English 0099 course helps students critically analyze and respond to texts written for general readers. Both courses are intended to prepare students for the types of reading and writing they will encounter in English 1001. Traditionally, a placement test created by the University Composition Committee (UComp) was used to identify which of the courses—English 0097, English 0099, or English 1001—a student could be expected to pass. This test involved students reading, summarizing, and responding to an expository text and then reflecting on their reading and writing processes. At the end of English 0097 and 0099, students provided portfolios of their work for review by a team of instructors who taught the courses. These portfolios were used to indicate if students were ready to move to the next level course. For students in English 0097, the next course would be another developmental course, English 0099; however, some students in English 0097 were able to produce portfolios that indicated their readiness to place directly into English 1001.

## **BEFORE COVID-19**

### **The GSP Stalls**

Though the composition programs at each campus are largely independent, the University has a long-standing cross-college composition committee, UComp, which coordinates composition placement practices, course outcomes, course policies, and other initiatives affecting composition programs across the institution. The collaborative nature of UComp typically

ensures buy-in for changes to the composition program across departments and colleges. However, the potential overlapping of interests between different department faculty and administrators can stymie changes that are not equally viewed as necessary at all campuses. For instance, based on a program review at UCBA in 2016, prior to COVID-19, we became interested in finding a new placement model to replace the essay-based placement system. Most UComp members did not support the change because of cost and the disruption to a process that was working well for the main campus.

Because of the state's remediation-free promise, students with threshold SAT/ACT scores were exempt from further placement testing, which meant most students admitted to the main campus did not need a placement test. The faculty and administrators were aligned with the opinions noted by Moos and Van Zanen that those scores were "'the easiest and most economical [approach]' in the realm of writing placement" (69). However, the regional campuses, because of their open admissions policies, still needed to conduct placement testing because most of their students either did not meet the threshold SAT/ACT scores or did not take the SAT/ACT.

In the University of Cincinnati's writing placement test prior to COVID-19, students summarized a text, wrote an essay response, and reflected on their writing practices used to complete the test. These placement tests were scored by two placement readers—with discrepant scores going to a third reader—all of whom had been normed by a placement coordinator prior to the testing season. This expensive and time-intensive process denied students clarity and reasoning for their assigned composition classes. Equally problematic, students often submitted responses that were too brief to rate based on the rubric. Although students could take up to five days to complete the assignment, most elected to complete it in a single, short sitting. Furthermore, selecting equitable readings for the test had been fraught. Program reviews indicated that some student populations were disproportionately placed in developmental courses, contributing to faculty concerns with placement.

To the UCBA UComp representatives, a self-placement tool seemed a potential alternative as it would better align with developmental course options, while giving students agency to make their own informed choice of which composition course to take. Similar to Gere et al., we foresaw a model where students, "after evaluating their own background and abilities via answering a series of questions, ... determine which course they should take" (155). Our student-focused goals aligned with Christie Toth, Director of Undergraduate Students at the University of Utah, who reports

in her meta-study of student self-placement, “Many participants also saw DSP as a way to offer students greater control over their own education” (22). Similarly, Royer and Gills feel that self-placement, unlike traditional placement, provides a “sense of rightness” to students “who make their own decisions” (Royer and Gills 65). We also felt that a self-placement system would provide a means for us to improve our program. As Becky L. Caouette states, “In giving students a choice among courses and a choice of courses, the FYW Program created an opportunity for sincere inquiry into how students sequence themselves in and out of first-year writing. This profoundly affects how the Program describes, populates, advertises, and teaches all of its courses” (64). By examining where students are placing themselves, we find it “important to think about what that space looks like and modify our curriculum accordingly” (Hart 100). Ultimately, the UCBA representatives believed that a self-placement model would benefit all stakeholders.

Despite these beliefs at one campus, it was not enough to convince everyone on UComp. The existing placement test was viewed as a valid means of placing students because it had been developed in consultation with composition assessment experts and a validity study had been conducted with its adoption in the early 2000s. Updating it, some felt, would be an expensive and time-consuming undertaking with uncertain benefits. And, in addition to questioning the value and difficulty of installation, concerns were raised regarding student intention. The general fear was that even if the self-placement tool were crafted correctly, students at regional campuses would over-place themselves. In their reflection of their own campus’s self-placement, Coleman and Smith note, “A few faculty expressed concerns that students had been empowered to place themselves into courses for which they were not prepared” only to find that, based on success rates, “faculty appeared to underestimate the abilities of their students” (417). Due to the conflicting views between the different campuses, talks of self-placement slipped away in the years before COVID-19.

### **The ALP Takes Off**

Though UCBA’s desire for a GSP had stalled in the years before COVID-19, the department began piloting an Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) in 2018 that closely follows the program at the Community College of Baltimore County (Adams et al.). Piloting a new ALP composition course required UComp committee support. Though the new ALP course would

be limited to the regional campuses, all agreed that it seemed worthwhile based on departmental review.

The ALP was important to UCBA because the department was examining ways to improve its developmental writing courses by re-examining outcomes, curriculum, and pedagogical approaches, particularly seeking to address equity issues that program review raised. National studies have found that the more developmental courses students are required to take, the less likely they are to persist in their academic careers (Bailey et al.; Jagers et al.; Shapiro et al). At UCBA, this was an important issue because ENGL 0099 requires students to complete two courses in separate semesters to finish the required English Composition course, so it presents a potential barrier to student completion. The data at UCBA indicated that only 27.4% of students who enrolled in standalone ENGL 0099 successfully completed ENGL 1001 within 3 semesters. Even students who completed ENGL 0099 with a very high grade tended to struggle to successfully complete ENGL 1001. The department had already redesigned the lowest level course so students could potentially skip the next developmental course and place into English Composition (ENGL 1001), reducing the time to completion of ENGL 1001 for some students. However, when we scrutinized the courses, we recognized potential equity issues. In reviewing our program, we found that our total enrollment of black students in all composition courses in the review period was 27.6% of the total population. However, they represented 67.9% of the enrollment of ENGL 0097, our lowest-level developmental course, and 48.6% of ENGL 0099. This was compared to the white student population of 54.6% total, and 18.9% of the 0097 enrollment and 31.3% of the 0099 enrollment. This seemed, then, to be a clear equity issue related directly to placement. Therefore, we found it essential to implement a model that would help our diverse student population.

UCBA spent two years developing the course and overcoming institutional and logistical hurdles, including a registration system not built to accommodate corequisite classes, finding qualified faculty to staff the ALP sections, and identifying additional class spaces on an already packed campus. Following Adams et al.'s model, ten students placed in English Composition and ten students identified as needing more development were registered in one English Composition course. The ten students identified for support went to another room following English Composition to meet with the same instructor to receive additional instruction.

The first ALP pilot was implemented in 2018-2019, with two sections offered in both semesters. Initial data showed that students successfully

completed the ALP at a comparable rate to the stand-alone ENGL 0099 course, but were, of course, also earning credit for their first-year writing course. Funding from a Strong Start to Finish grant allowed us to host a substantial, full-day summer workshop on the ALP for all full-time and part-time faculty to learn about the ALP program. The initial success of the ALP pilot enabled the department to hire a full-time, tenure-track faculty member to teach within the ALP and increase the number of sections to six ALP sections in Fall 2019.

So, on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, the two major composition causes championed by the college were moving in separate directions. The conversation about GSP stalled, but ALP was slowly expanding. And, unless an unexpected once-in-a-lifetime catastrophe were to suddenly shutter the nation, the department was ready to continue this trajectory into the spring 2020 semester and beyond.

## **COVID-19 CHANGES APPROACHES**

### **Selecting a Placement Model**

In March 2020, the university followed the rising national trend and closed. Such shuttering affected every aspect of the university, but a wave of emergencies inundated UCBA. As a regional campus, we needed to find immediate solutions for problems that had a harder impact on our students than on other students across the university, such as how to provide technological access to those who relied on campus equipment, how to support a student population who had lost their employment, and how to immediately transfer our in-person pedagogy to an online model for students who had little experience with online learning. With such crucial day-to-day problems, the composition program was focused initially on survival. But as the COVID-19 crisis continued, these immediate issues gave way to larger and more consequential problems regarding the future of our program. While the remaining weeks of the spring 2020 semester were hastily placed online to maintain a semblance of normalcy, the upcoming fall 2020 semester remained unsolved. COVID-19 closures disrupted SAT and ACT test taking, leading to uneven access for graduating high school students. To address this, the university followed the lead of other institutions making standardized test scores optional (Hubler; Vigdor and Diaz). While most students coming for fall 2020 had these scores, future students were not able to take their tests while centers were closed. Without these scores, UC's largest campus

needed a method of affirming college readiness and assessing the writing capabilities of tens of thousands of incoming freshmen—and it needed to be ready before students would begin applying for the next academic year (2021-2022) in five months.

Implementing a self-placement model was not a forgone conclusion. In the period following the ACT/SAT announcement that the tests would not be offered, several options were considered. The initial plan was to expand the essay placement system already used at the regional campuses to cover all incoming students across the university. However, this plan was quickly recognized as unfeasible—if not impossible—due to the limited time and budget. At UCBA, for example, four paid readers worked year-round to assess an average of four hundred essays each, with the majority of that work happening over the summer in preparation for fall enrollment. To cover the entire incoming class would take roughly twenty new readers to evaluate thousands of essays on a shorter timeline. Without a system or funding in place to support that, the interest in adopting new placement practices accelerated quickly.

When UComp discussion began examining alternative methods, UCBA saw an opportunity to reintroduce the idea of the GSP. While the model still maintained its ability to support student agency, it offered a new pragmatic solution: if the system's placement choice was largely self-guided by students, it could efficiently place thousands of incoming individuals without vastly increasing cost and labor, something all the colleges and the administration desired. Moos and Van Zanen note that scholars have found a division on the financial aspect of self-placement, stating that while it can at times “offer financial savings (Gere et al.; Royer and Gilles),” others found the economic impact “negligible” (Blakesley; Toth). However, due to the conditions caused by the pandemic, it provided a viable option due to scope and timeline.

While UComp members were examining a self-placement model, administrators at all three colleges were initially more interested in implementing a system that they viewed as being even more streamlined: a Multiple Measures (MM) model. This model would assess student competencies based on their overall high school GPA and their specific high school English GPA (the belief being that the course-specific GPA was a stronger predictor of a student's ability to succeed in the college-related course), ACT/SAT test scores if present, and state-level graduation tests in relevant subject areas (likely course-level exit exams for high school English). The system would be so streamlined that factors influencing student placement would be de-



terminated by algorithm, largely eliminating the English department faculty and readers from the placement process.

UComp deemed the MM placement model inappropriate for the University of Cincinnati because of the difficulty in creating a system capable of pulling the information needed from the University's databases, along with concerns about the equity of MM models. While the Two-Year College Association's 2016 white paper mentions MM alongside DSP as being better than a test (Klausman et al.), and nascent studies on both MM and DSP in community and two-year colleges continue to show varying degrees of predictive, content, and social validity (Bahr et al.; Coleman and Smith; Crusan; Fagioli et al.; Gilman et al., Snyder et al.), UComp members argued against MM for the following reasons.

A number of studies have shown that MM, while leading to similar success rates as DSP, has not been as successful at addressing equity in placement, and, across our campuses, all stakeholders saw equitable placement as a priority. In the case of MM, Klausman and Lynch point out the continued gate-keeping effect of using high school GPAs and test scores and showed instead more demographically proportional placements with similar student success rates with a shift from MM to DSP (Klausman and Lynch, 69-70, 77). UComp was concerned that administrators' interest in MM in the abstract did not take into account the nuances of a diverse student body with multiple, local campuses, much less the need to connect placement practices with pedagogical and curricular ones. In revisiting the "TYCA White Paper on Placement Reform," Hassel and Giordano emphasized that two-year colleges have "a unique local or regional purpose" that problematizes lumping them together as a category of institutions, underscoring the need for placement practices that can respond to the complexity of students' experiences and backgrounds in their locality and further advocated for placement practices "aligned with the curriculum and with the pedagogical approaches used in a program" (Gilman et al. 3, 5). Aull's summary of research in her 2017 introduction to the "Tools and Tech" forum cites numerous scholars who show that, beyond measuring "what it purported to measure," "a writing assessment must include a recognizable and supportable theoretical foundation" and account for "local needs" (Aull, Tools, A3). While MM systems were a potential option in certain environments, the immediate requirement caused by the pandemic left too many unknowns—from accuracy to budget—to be considered at the time.

Furthermore, UComp was concerned that emphasis on the supposed efficiency of MM was based in part on the incorrect assumption that all

developmental courses are necessarily barriers to degree completion at all institutions. Developmental courses, the committee believed, were gateways to navigating college success rather than roadblocks. Similarly, Hassel and Giordano disagreed with the assertion that “developmental courses in general are an obstacle to completing a degree for two-year college students,” citing their own research as well as data from a 2017 study by the U. S. Department of Education showing the link between success in developmental courses and degree completion (Gilman et al. 2-3). In the decades since, scholars including Ira Shor and John Trimbur have argued that, while “basic writing” courses are stigmatizing, new approaches to developmental writing (including ALP, stretch, and corequisite courses) have helped improve student success and retention at many institutions, with some researchers arguing that stigmatization—the feeling of not belonging—comes from being unsuccessful in a course as much or more than it comes from placing into a developmental course (Ruecker et al.; Peele 59-60, 63). Even contemporary critics of developmental writing courses advocate for radically reworking approaches to teaching writing, viewing attempts to improve retention efforts by streamlining processes or removing developmental writing courses from four-year institutions (as the state of Ohio has done) as ineffective “retrofits” and erasures that may make the problem of stigmatization worse. Using MM as a way to gloss over or ignore the support students need to succeed in writing courses increases the likelihood of students failing courses and losing their sense of control and agency, the latter of which DSP expressly combats.

After several meetings and discussions, UComp and administrators on all campuses moved to craft a guided self-placement. Despite the differences between each campus, the members recognized the need to collaborate in designing a placement system that would work for all students, while meeting the needs of each college. Following Hassel and Giordano’s assertion about placement needing to meet the unique experiences and backgrounds of students, the GSP would be customized for each campus to highlight its offerings.

Because of the urgency of the situation, the university was required to move immediately into a “pilot” that included all UC students in the fall 2021 enrollment window. With online orientation, online enrollment, and mostly online classes, the GSP needed to function as both an introduction to the available courses and as a means for students to select the best option for themselves. And it needed to be ready in four months. With no backup method possible, it *had* to work.

The guided self-placement had the potential to be more inclusive and would be more clearly aligned with the pedagogy that informed how we teach composition courses and would empower students to take responsibility for their coursework. Students could sign up for classes while lowering the stigma of certain writing courses (Caouette). To ensure students placed themselves into courses where they would be successful, the placement needed to look at factors that impact student success beyond reading and writing skill level. Rachel Lewis Ketai explains that “DSP offers the potential to address the racialization of basic writing that too often occurs through traditional placement practices” (141). We wanted to be careful in our construction of the self-placement tool to guide students in their review of the courses and their reflections upon their own prior experiences with reading and writing so that they could more appropriately judge for themselves where they would feel comfortable starting their academic writing journey, while also working to eliminate institutionalized racial injustice and barriers to success, knowing that the basic swap from one placement mechanism to the other was not a fix-all.

### **UComp Creates the GSP**

With the DSP (called Guided Self-Placement or GSP) selected as a feasible process, UComp formed an *ad hoc* committee to plan its implementation during fall of 2020 and charged it with having a pilot in place by mid-January of 2021 for students who would begin taking courses in summer and fall of 2021.

In the subcommittee’s initial meetings in October of 2020, it reviewed the literature on self-placement, examined directed self-placement systems being used at institutions across the country, identified important campus stakeholders that would help implement the online system, and drafted rationales. As it reviewed other directed self-placement processes in use, the committee was looking specifically to see what the instruments appeared to measure, how user-friendly they appeared to be, how the technology functioned, and what the level of faculty and staff involvement appeared to be. Each of the campuses brought different needs to the table, which required building an instrument that responded equally well to those needs. The main campus had to privilege a streamlined process with low-levels of faculty and staff involvement to accommodate the thousands of students they would need to see through the process, while the regional campuses had to privilege elements like offering a clear recommendation, describing the numerous

course options in student-friendly language, and providing individualized support that responded to the needs of their unique student populations.

One of the persistent challenges encountered in discussing GSP with administrators, staff, and advisors, was moving away from the language of testing. Previously, all placements at the university did, indeed, use a test in one form or another, but one of the keys in helping students understand the difference between GSP and the previous placement test was replacing the word, “test,” which implied a high-stakes evaluation of students’ “English” skills. Placement coordinators at the three campuses faced the double problem of getting stakeholders to talk about “placement” instead of “placement testing” and to talk about “writing” instead of “English.” This had never been, after all, a placement related to students’ proficiency with the English language, a point of concern that had occasionally been raised by colleagues working with incoming international students, who had to keep track of TESOL scores and their implications while also having to deal with “English placement” scores. While no stakeholders were opposed to this shift in language, many saw it initially as a meaningless change in disciplinary jargon. It was not until they were able to review the GSP instrument in progress and how this shift in language helped clarify the placement system to students that they began to see the value in the updated language. This perspective would have been unlikely had it not been for COVID-19, as the evidence was not apparent until the project was underway. However, the timeline and closures caused by the pandemic provided a space to create both new approaches as well as new perspectives.

Given the time constraints, the subcommittee designing the GSP decided to use a form that could be adopted consistently across campuses but modified to reflect the courses offered by each campus. The subcommittee would draft the questions and introductory instructions, which would be the same across campuses, but each campus would create their own support apparatuses tailored to their own campus. This involved bringing in numerous people across English departments to create supplementary materials in multiple modalities, including texts, videos, and infographics.

To provide students with the agency to direct their own learning, the course choices and GSP questions would need to be clear for incoming students. Providing an accurate and equitable placement required ensuring that the questions were appropriate in scope and aligned with course and program outcomes. The subcommittee initially considered questions that covered general study skills, reading skills, writing skills, exposure to typical assignments, technology skills, previous writing experiences, collaborative

skills, motivation, and ability to seek help. The committee agreed that the assessment had to account for what Manuel Piña describes as the “dispositional habitus that students bring with them to the placement decision” (17), as well as skills-based elements to serve the purposes both students and programs needed served. It would have to be relatively brief to satisfy students, who only had so much time, and administrators, who wanted to ensure that enrollment processes didn’t become obstacles to admission, while still getting at enough information and reflection to be authentic enough to help students understand the courses and their own learning and writing histories to make a choice in their own best interests. So, the instrument was revised over the course of a couple of weeks, narrowing it to questions addressing students’ perceptions of their past writing experiences, comfort level with reading and writing tasks, general study skills, and willingness to seek support. In the following week, about a dozen draft questions were circulated for feedback among faculty and student representatives from the three English departments. While this process resulted in narrowing the list of questions down to 10, with pressure from some levels of administration to get the GSP down to a single question, the subcommittee eventually winnowed it down to 8 questions, with five related to writing experiences, and one in each of the other categories. The process of developing the questions and revising them with feedback from stakeholders took about a month and was concurrent with designing the layout of the instrument itself.

### **Challenges Creating the GSP**

Throughout the development process the subcommittee was forced to balance ideal practice with available technology. The placement model used prior to the GSP was streamlined in a manner that would make it difficult to simply swap in a new system. Originally, students were emailed instructions on how to access the material. They would have until the deadline to read a selected article and write a response. If requested, students could also take the placement test in person. For the sake of admissions and advisors, all placement tests needed to be scored before the student attended an orientation session.

In determining what platform should be used to host the GSP, UComp needed to consider user-friendliness, data security, and flexibility of modalities as primary concerns. Unfortunately, there was no software that met expectations for all three categories that would not have cost the university additional funds. Ultimately the more data-secure, already-paid-for system

was selected despite reducing user-friendliness. The platform was initially selected to host the traditional placement model rather than a system where students interacted with the materials to select an option best suited for themselves. Because of this, the student experience required additional clicks, and support materials could not be embedded. Instructional videos, for example, appeared in unintuitive locations, and the sample reading had to be hosted on another site. The forms could neither tabulate students' responses nor allow design choices that would help clarify hierarchies of information. Despite these drawbacks, the committee felt that it was possible to carefully construct a GSP that helped explain to students the necessary steps needed to select the right course for them.

With the platform selected, the GSP began to take shape. As students completed their pre-enrollment process, they would be guided to take the placement survey. Unlike the previous model, the GSP was an interactive process for students selecting the course that they felt best for their success. Students first entered a splash page welcoming them to the GSP and explaining—through video—the importance of, and agency provided by, the process. There was also an additional video embedded to explain the different classes in the composition sequence. Following this, they would answer the questions based on their own experiences. Upon completing the survey, students would be suggested a course based on their answers. Selecting the course, however, had to be done by the student because the platform itself was unable to tabulate the answers and recommend a corresponding class. The placement coordinator worried that this might lead to discrepancies in the courses selected, but we had to wait until the placements started to find out.

Early in the process, the committee found that the system also provided ample hurdles for faculty as well. The data collected through the GSP could not be automatically transferred to the IT systems that contained admissions data and student records, which had been a perpetual issue with the previous placement system, as well: scores from one system had to be manually transferred in batches to the IT systems where they would be accessed by stakeholders. In theory, GSP was an opportunity to correct this problem. After meeting with a range of stakeholders and experts, including college deans, administrative department heads, and IT staff, it was concluded that the onerous workarounds; which involved each college's English, admissions, and sometimes IT departments; would have to continue. As such, the GSP would not eliminate the cross-departmental labor despite "streamlining" certain aspects.

As the GSP plan was finalized in December, it was presented to multiple administrators for review, including UComp, college curriculum committees, admissions offices, and advising. UComp representatives from the regional campuses gave presentations to advisors in particular to support their work scheduling students during orientation. Despite the sizeable number of stakeholders involved, and the reservations put forward particularly by administrators and advisors that students might take advantage of the system to over-place themselves, the pilot was ready to launch in January.

## **AFTER GSP IMPLEMENTATION**

Once complete, the GSP was disseminated to students through emails from admissions, connected variously with the placement web pages at each college and, in the case of one campus, a Canvas portal. When the placement went live, the workload of the department expanded as we supported prospective students navigating the new placement system. Because the outcome was unknown, early student responses were closely observed. As anticipated, the writing placement coordinator noticed discrepancies with some of the student choices. A small but noticeable number of students placed themselves in classes incongruous with their answers in the GSP. Though misplacement had been a previously stated concern since the earliest pre-COVID-19 discussion of self-placement, the outcome was reversed: more students appeared to under-place themselves than over-place themselves, disregarding their answers on the survey about their adequate level of preparedness and instead placing themselves in a course lower than the course suggested by their answers.

Most students potentially misplacing themselves were isolated to regional campuses where the composition course offerings were more diverse. With some students potentially under-placing themselves, the placement coordinator at UCBA developed a plan to intervene and to understand how the GSP might be improved. Previous assessment readers volunteered to shift their role to outreach. Each week, these faculty members reached out to these students over email, text, and phone, initiating conversations to discuss the students' decisions and clarify their options. Over the course of the summer, the outreach system contacted approximately 360 UCBA students. When the placement outreach workers spoke to students, the goal was not to challenge the choices students had made but to ensure they had selected the best option based on their needs and answers. Through these calls, we found that students placed themselves in potentially incorrect classes for

several reasons: some of them second-guessed their preparedness despite how the GSP questions rated it because of overall anxiety about their writing skills and ability to manage college courses and workloads. Others misinterpreted the goal of developmental writing and thought they needed to “start at the beginning” of the sequence. Others still miscalculated the number of responses they gave, and thus followed an incorrect recommendation. In addition to supporting student choices, the calls were also an opportunity to give a personal approach to college enrollment. Because the vast majority of the college onboarding process was online and because students are generally required to complete placements before orientation, these mid-summer calls were some of the first communications students received through the university. The calls then became a means to welcome students and show not only that their choices were respected, but also that the university cared.

In the semesters since, the GSP has been tweaked multiple times to ensure equivalence across campuses and to provide context related to the type of support being offered at each campus, but the content has remained consistent as data collection continues.

## **ALP AND TEACHING**

The implementation of the GSP gave students a choice in the composition course they viewed as best for them. Due to COVID-19, students entered with varying levels of learning loss and with increased responsibilities and rates of depression and anxiety—all factors that may result in more students who desire additional support and structure for their learning. Indeed, students were seeking additional, intensive support as they began their studies.

The most dramatic change we saw was a vast expansion of the ALP courses. Students taking the GSP selected enrollment in this course in numbers far beyond what had been initially offered in our previous placement model. Prior to the pandemic, the ALP was growing at a rate that faculty felt best suited our resources. Each semester, we would offer new sections that balanced the results of our placement readings and the number of available educators. However, once the GSP began, the number of courses needed was in many ways set by student choice. And, to our surprise, the number of students who selected the ALP section skyrocketed. As such, we saw the demand for ALP expanded rapidly, from six sections in fall 2020 to nineteen in fall 2021.

In addition to the increased number of sections, the ALP expanded modality to meet new student needs during the pandemic. The course was



now offered face-to-face, fully online (in both synchronous and asynchronous formats), and in hybrid models. In many ways, these choices were made due to uncertainty caused by COVID-19, and the department elected for an approach that would provide the utmost flexibility for student needs. However, such varied options created potential difficulties for educators to meet the wide array of potential teaching modes.

This quick expansion, both of additional sections and additional modalities, placed immediate stressors on hiring. Though originally taught at a rate that was easy to staff with the interested and trained faculty we had, with GSP we immediately needed more faculty to staff burgeoning ALP sections. Our filtering and interviewing practices for hiring part-time faculty had to shift very quickly. We were suddenly looking for faculty who had experience with corequisite models of teaching, of course, but also faculty who could quickly train and buy into the model of corequisite writing instruction that ALP uses, as well as be ready to take on the more rigorous instruction required in our English Composition course, which is not necessarily like the first-year composition course in colleges that many of our applicants had prior experience with. (And we needed them to be able to manage all of this online in many cases.) Describing the ALP to interviewees and inquiring about their interest in teaching in such a program became standard practice, as did reviewing transcripts and teaching experience for indications of compatibility for working with the diversity of learning profiles present in the classes.

Because of the significant changes brought by the pandemic, assessment models that attempt to compare our current data with past data reflecting a radically different landscape are wholly inadequate. The student success data indicates that ALP is more successful at helping students complete ENGL 1001 than standalone ENGL 0099. For students who need developmental support, those enrolled in ALP complete their ENGL 1001 at a rate of 46.4%—far higher than the rate of success of standalone ENGL 0099 (27.4%). When the two harshest pandemic semesters are removed from the data, the total success rate for the ALP remains at 64.3%, despite the various trials students face during this ongoing challenging time. We can see that ALP and GSP are working together because we see the equity gap closing in the numbers of minority students placing themselves into ENGL 1001 and ENGL 1001C (ALP) and finishing successfully in one semester under GSP. We also believe that ALP is meeting the needs of students who would typically place by test or might otherwise choose a developmental course such as 0099 or 0097 to successfully complete ENGL 1001 within a single semester, as evidenced by the data discussed earlier.

Given the demand for the ALP and the difficulty staffing ALP sections, UCBA was awarded money through a University Strategic Sizing Grant initiative to hire a new full-time, tenure-track faculty member to teach in the ALP starting in fall 2022.

## **CLOSING**

The emergency needs caused by the pandemic united stakeholders to enact advancements that were previously dismissed. The outcome is a GSP that supports student agency and the expansive growth of the once-nascent ALP offering.

The data we've reviewed indicates that ALP alone was helping to address the equity gap, but together, ALP and GSP are working to address equity issues through multiple angles. ALP and GSP address successful completion concerns and equity issues by providing opportunities for students to determine their own progress through their educational careers. GSP supports students in selecting a writing course that will extend their writing skills based on where they are right now, as they begin their educational journey, while the ALP course gives students the opportunity to complete a college level course when they might not otherwise attempt it without the additional support available.

Though some stakeholders had long petitioned for these changes, the conversation was not fully considered until the change offered pragmatic solutions to an unforeseeable, immediate catastrophe. The reasoning behind the sudden UComp endorsement of GSP did not undermine its philosophical goal, rather it served as a catalyst to bring the various stakeholders to a conversation that had previously felt unnecessary.

But seizing the crisis moment of the pandemic to institute these necessary changes has not been without its costs. Being in a situation where GSP "had to work" has resulted in several issues (issues with admissions and advising, technical issues with data entry and transfer between systems, etc.). The drastic increase in demand for the ALP, which came with the switch to the GSP, has continued to create staffing issues, which have only been exaggerated by the same hiring and retention difficulties plaguing so many industries in this post-pandemic moment. Forecasting course needs for scheduling purposes remains incredibly difficult. While instituting the GSP prior to the pandemic would have been difficult and would have presented many of the same challenges, making those changes without the pressure

of an immediate crisis would have allowed for more time to think through issues and develop more sustainable solutions.

It was perhaps easier prior to 2020 to take periods of relative stability for granted and put off difficult but necessary changes. All departments face inertia, and while we had wanted to move our placement from the test to guided self-placement prior to the pandemic, inertia had kept many stakeholders from seeing the need for change or the value of a new system. The COVID-19 crisis required all stakeholders to think creatively about how to solve the problem with placement testing, providing us with the perfect opportunity to suggest guided self-placement once again. Though a traumatic period on a global, communal, and personal level, the pandemic did not stop volunteers from coming together to create a new placement process and ALP that both met everyone's needs and was mindful of costs and student agency.

Based on our experiences, faculty who would like to argue for changes at their institutions prior to moments of crisis should consider bringing in current research on how their desired approach supports student success in particular. This research can provide guidance as changes are designed and implemented. It is also important to find other stakeholders to create a collaborative relationship to address the area of concern. Involving other stakeholders increases the likelihood of successful adoption of the change being considered. We also suggest taking a close look at how the initiative ties into the institution's strategic plan. Many times, the strategic plan will have a DEI component that placement revision can be positioned into. And keep in mind that transitioning between approaches may require less monetary support than initially anticipated, especially if people are willing to be creative with their resources.

As we find ourselves reflecting on the vast advancements our composition program enacted during a brief and stressful timeline, we hope in the future that all stakeholders (including ourselves) remember how easily these moments of relative stability can be upended, while remaining optimistic about their own adaptability and resilience.

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