It's Not a Neutral Choice: Implications of Student Self-Placement in a Basic Writing Course

Jennifer Burke Reifman

ABSTRACT: Research has indicated that students experience negative reactions to their placement in a basic writing course. Despite negative disposition toward basic writing, self-placement practices have become commonplace in higher education for advancing equity. Using the concept of "Possible Academic Selves," this article examines student writing produced in a placement process to challenge the neutrality of self-placement into a basic writing course. As statistical and textual analysis of student writing reveals, placement in a basic writing course could be viewed as a disruption to a student's Possible Academic Self, or the student they imagined they would be in college. Analyzing student placement challenge writing in this light, as well as considering the long history of the basic writer as "other," reveals the disruptions that can occur to a student's sense of self, complicating the nature of writing placement processes that rely on students to make choices about their own course placement.

KEYWORDS: basic writing; equity; possible academic selves; self-placement; student choice

INTRODUCTION

Basic writing scholars have historically pushed against deficit-based notions of the students in basic writing classes (Adler-Kassner; Bartholomae; Gray-Rosendale; Shaughnessy; Shor) and sought to remove basic writing from the margins of higher education to end the othering of students and classes (Inman 2). Despite this work, negative perceptions of basic writing classes persist, heightened by policy research that suggests that as many as one-third of students are misplaced in developmental courses to their detriment (Scott-Clayton 27). As a result, research on developmental courses across the country has routinely named placement, and particularly self-placement, as the site of reconciliation in addressing equity issues around remediation (Ganga et al.). Inherent in this push toward self-placement is the belief that students, when provided with choice, will place themselves more equitably than timed assessments and enter higher education more empowered (Blakesley; Moos and Van Zanen), even though terms like *development*, *remedial*, and *basic* carry deep implications around student preparedness and even capability (Toth "Two-Year Colleges"). Despite the push toward

self-placement in post-secondary writing classes, particularly in two-year colleges (see Hassel et al.; Toth; Nastal et al.), scholarship on writing placement and perceptions of basic writing have not intersected to understand the complexity of choice in placement, particularly as it relates to the stigma surrounding basic writing and its association with an "outsider" status.

In this article, I examine the student writing produced as part of a collaborative placement model at the University of California Davis, inspired by Directed Self Placement (DSP) (Royer and Gilles) and Informed Self Placement (Bedore and Rossen-Knill). The DSP-inspired survey, called Writing Placement 2020, asked students to respond to 35 Likert-scale questions developed from commonplace DSP approaches where they reported on their in-school literacy practices, their confidence regarding academic writing, and their academic achievements. The placement mechanism provided students with a placement in one of the four credit-bearing course offerings (two sheltered language courses, an "entry-level"/basic writing course, and a "lower division"/first-year composition course) and included a chance to directly oppose their placement in the form of a post-survey "Challenge Activity." The Challenge Activity asked students to develop a written rationale where they could disagree with the survey's recommended placement and argue for placement in a different class. Many of the 239 Challenge Activity participants used this opportunity to argue out of a basic writing placement and forgo the the Entry-Level Writing Requirement (ELWR), a University of California system-wide requirement that can only be met through passing specific writing courses on campus or qualifying test scores.

As a popular version of self-placement, one where students are given an automatic placement and then provided with a chance to disagree, investigating this moment is key to understanding the complexity around this choice. By acknowledging that self-placing into a basic writing class is not a neutral social and political choice for students, especially when

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viewing the long history of basic writing as racially and linguistically other (Lamos; Royster and Williams), I reconsider the perceived simplicity of leaving the choice in students' hands, particularly as self-placement becomes a legislatively-backed panacea for equity in higher education. In reviewing the student writing produced for the Challenge Activity, I work to answer the following questions:

- What beliefs and understandings about basic writing did students espouse in arguing for a different placement?
- How does placing the burden of placement on students impact their sense of self and belonging in post-secondary writing spaces?

In this pursuit, this article presents a mixed methods analysis of the written responses produced by students placed into what the University of California system calls an "entry-level" (basic writing) course and examines the evidence they present in advocating for a movement to a "lower division" (first-year composition) course. Using descriptive statistics and coding via a grounded theory approach, a representative sampling of 91 student Challenge Essays were analyzed for prevailing themes and then compared for concurrences and statistical significance. As I detail, regardless of the students' ethnic/racial identities, their status as a first-generation student, or their identified gender, the language students used to describe the basic writing classes reveals ingrained schema and beliefs around basic writing classes and the students in them. In this analysis, I have found that many students see placement in a basic writing class as an impediment or condemnation of their studenthood, and I highlight how students leverage particular value systems around remediation and basic writing to argue their way out of a basic writing class.

Specifically, the submitted writing revealed how students, who had never experienced a basic writing course, believed their future student selves or Academic Possible Selves (APSs) were fundamentally mismatched from their constructed perception of the course. This mismatch reveals the disruption that placement in basic writing courses might have in student identity, reifying the complexity of student choice in placement and how this choice is mediated by social ideologies and common misconceptions around basic writing classes and students, as well as the potential double-bind students from multiply marginalized identities might experience because of their placement. Applying the concept of "Possible Selves" (Markus and Nurius 158) and specifically APSs to understand these responses, this

article forwards the role of personal perceptions of identity in understanding student response to placement and choice in that placement. "Possible Selves" have been described as "cognitive manifestations of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, threats" (Markus and Nurius 158) and are related to "a compelling vision or conception of the self in a future state" (Wurf and Markus 39); the concept has been historically tracked onto the experience of students in transition, like those going through self-placement, in order to understand action and the guiding principles behind choice.

In complicating choice and challenging the neutrality of self-placement, the following section reviews literature around how the basic writer label is stigmatized, how this stigma can be especially damaging to students from historically marginalized identities, and how the "basic writer" label connects to the concept of Possible Selves to understand the reaction some students experience in their placement in a basic writing course. The findings section provides excerpts from coded challenge essays that detail the dissonance students experience between their connection to this label and their perception of this placement. Finally, I end with a discussion of these findings as representations of disrupted future selves.

The Stigma of Basic Writing

Basic writing has a long history of living in the margins of higher education institutions (Ritter; Stanley); teachers and scholars of basic writing courses know well that the label of "basic writer" is fraught. Early in the formation of basic writing as a subfield, Shaughnessy worked to first define the concept of a basic writer and to reframe how teachers approach the basic writing classroom because of the perceived negatives associated with the basic writing label. While basic writing classes had existed for decades prior to Shaughnessy's contributions (Otte and Mlynarczyk), her work defining and describing the basic writer gave way to a wealth of research exploring the othering of students with this label.

Notably, Rose discusses how the label comes with a narrow set of assumptions about the student: "remedial is to be substandard, inadequate, and...metaphorically connected to disease and mental defect" (349). Highlighted in the written debates of Ira Shor and Karen Greenberg in the 1990s, there has been a longstanding tension about the function of basic writing as a gatekeeping "apartheid" (Shor) versus a necessary steppingstone for disadvantaged students (Greenberg). Further, there is a long-documented presence of students of color and students from non-dominant linguistic

backgrounds being placed into basic writing classes at higher rates than their non-white peers (Henson and Hern; Shor), feeding into the conflation between students of color and basic writing students (Lamos; Royster and Williams). While scholars have pushed against the deficit-based perceptions of basic writing students (Cole and Griffin; Gutiérrez et al.; Hull et al.; Melzer; Parisi) or sought to dismantle remedial writing courses based on the inequity apparent in this construct (Bartholomae; Shor), the stigma of remediation remains, particularly in placement moments.

While teachers of basic writing have debated this stigma, students of basic writing are most impacted by the long legacy of basic writing being conflated with a diminished academic status and the possibility of being multiply marginalized (Adler-Kassner). Scholars in higher education have responded to this issue by calling for a reduction in basic writing in higher education and have examined how students perceive their placement in a basic writing or remedial course. Koch, Slate, and Moore's study of developmental courses at a Texas community college revealed that students initially expressed negative feelings toward being placed in a developmental class, relating their placement with a perceived lack of intelligence (72). In another study, Bachman found that many students experienced "fear, embarrassment, or disdain" (18) because of their placement in a developmental course. Bachman also found that some students connect "remediation with being 'dumb' or 'not trying' hard enough", while others saw it as a "'waste of time' or a delay of core coursework" (18).

In surveying developmental reading students at a Southwestern University, Lesley also found that students resented their placement in remedial coursework and that their resentment builds on a history of being labeled as remedial and in need of intervention. Importantly, Lesley's study reveals that the students who are stuck in a cycle of remediation are often treated with little intellectual value and were in fact subject to the remediation process as an inoculation, as Rose and others discuss. While this research is not solely located in the basic writing context, it does begin to reveal the ways in which students respond to the label and how they see their placement in basic writing classes. In fact, over 80% of the Challenge Essay participants choose to argue against their placement in a basic writing course and for a placement in first year writing, rejecting the label of basic writer.

Placement in Basic Writing & Misaligned Academic Possible Selves

Today, a wealth of higher education research explicitly names how students, particularly students of color and students of diverse linguistic backgrounds, are negatively impacted by placements in basic writing courses. Specifically, research has found that placement in lengthy remedial sequences and non-credit bearing courses have proven problematic for these populations, causing legislative reform across the country limiting basic writing offerings (Bailey; Bailey et al.; Hodara et al.; Scott-Clayton), reinforcing perspectives on basic writing as detrimental and punitive. Nonetheless, basic writing courses remain a mainstay of higher education.

As a result, many institutions have turned to contemporary placement practices that position students as agents of their placement. Directed Self Placement (Royer and Gilles), Informed Self Placement (Bedore and Rossen-Knill), and other various forms of placement that center student-experience (Lewiecki-Wilson et al.) are forwarded to ensure that students are not punitively placed in basic writing courses. This effort is both to counter the inequitable impacts of standardized placement practices like COMPASS, ACCUPLACER, and SAT scores (Rutschow and Mayer 2; Toth 139) and to help increase student self-efficacy in their writing classes (Gere et al. 161). In many cases, research suggests that providing students with the ability to choose their writing course upon entering college will counter the inherent bias and racism of some of the direct assessments (e.g. Toth).

While self-placement practices seek to counter issues of over-representation of particular ethno-racial and language groups in basic writing classes, these practices rarely attend to the stigma that students bring to the notion of being labeled a basic writer and the way this label is synonymous with "conditionally accepted" or academic "other." One lens to understand the response of students when placed into a developmental writing course is the domain of Possible Selves, a concept drawing from research on self-conception and self-knowledge. Possible Selves, or the ways that individuals conceive of their future selves, reflect the "selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming" (Markus and Nurius 954). Possible Selves are intimately connected to our current selves and derived from our past selves, but also deeply reflective of the person's sociocultural context and impacted by social constructions of identity like class (Stevenson and Clegg), gender (Lips), and racial identity (Oyserman et al.; Oyserman and Fryberg;). Contemporary work around Possible Selves has been used to understand

how student perceptions of their future selves may be linked to motivation and persistence (Leondari et al.; Oyserman and Fryberg) and engagement in academic activities (Oyserman et al.). In these contexts, Possible Selves can be directly impacted by certain educational actors, like instructors, and certain kinds of feedback (Oyserman and Fryberg).

Interestingly, APS, as a theory, has not been explicitly connected to perceptions of being labeled a basic writer, and despite research that suggests that students' past experiences can influence their self-placement decisions (Schendel and O'Neill) and that "students' ability to self-assess can be seen as directly related to writing self-efficacy" (Aull 3), placement literature has not considered the role of APSs and how these selves are informed by deficit perceptions of basic writers. Thus, basic writing scholars should consider how deficit perceptions of basic writers mediate student choice in self-placement and are tied up in issues of race and identity, particularly as self-placement seeks to neutralize issues of race in placement. APS is a critical framework to further understand the non-neutrality of student choice in self-placement, particularly as these self-placement processes are becoming go-to solutions in avoiding inequitable placements.

METHODS

Description of Writing Placement 2020

Writing Placement 2020 was a writing placement mechanism designed by members of the university writing program to replace the University of California's in-person timed writing assessment that was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and was used to place students in one of the following: two possible sheltered language courses (largely occupied by international students), an "entry-level" writing course to meet the University of California's system-wide incoming writing requirement, or a "lower-division" writing course to meet the first-year writing requirement. While many students at UC Davis arrive with qualifying test scores for the University-wide entry-level writing requirement (ELWR), nearly 60% of students arrive unfulfilled. Writing Placement 2020 acted as a means for fulfilling this requirement, particularly if students challenged out of the entry-level writing class placement. Incoming students are educated around this requirement and its impact through orientation and advisor meetings.

Administered from March 2020 into December 2020, Writing Placement 2020 consisted of two parts: 1) a required multiliteracy and language

survey of 35 questions where students reported on school experiences, knowledge, and confidence levels and 2) an optional "Challenge Activity" where students selected a representative sample of their academic writing and wrote a rationale for a different placement in the form of the challenge essay. Incoming students were sent links to Writing Placement 2020 in their admissions checklist with no description of the process. Their introduction to the placement process was presented in a 2-minute video after they clicked the link where the program director described the entry-level and lower-division writing requirements, detailed means for fulfillment, and provided students with a brief overview of the survey and the possible challenge activity. The video encouraged students to answer questions honestly and informed students that the Writing Placement 2020 was a survey meant to help students "identify the best course for you" before they were automatically directed to begin answering questions in the survey.

The required survey was designed based on the best practices of DSP-based questionnaires, asking students about their school-based writing experiences with frequency questions like "I received written feedback on my writing from teachers and peers."
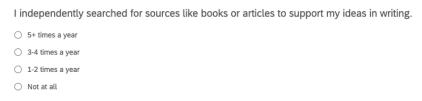
I independently searched for sources like books or articles to support my ideas in writing.

○ 5+ times a year

○ 3-4 times a year

○ 1-2 times a year

○ Not at all

Figure 1. Frequency Example Question from Writing Placement 2020

The survey also included Likert-Scale, agreement-based statements like "I can use different strategies for starting a writing assignment (brainstorming, planning, outlining, etc.)" and "I can clearly indicate when I'm using the ideas or language of others in my writing."

I know how to apply feedback about my writing to improve it.

○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

Figure 2. Likert Example Question from Writing Placement 2020

Responses were calculated into a final numeric score that was mapped to course placement options that students saw at the end of the survey. Knowing that automatic survey placements would not suit all students, the writing placement team designed the Challenge Activity (see Appendix A) to engage students in choice and ask them to advocate for their desired placement. As part of this, students were directed to the Writing Placement website, where they found the course descriptions, developed by course instructors (see Table 1), as well as further description of the requirements they needed to fulfill. Students may have also done their own research about the courses but were not directed anywhere else.

Table 1. Course Descriptions Provided to Students

Entry-Level Writing Description	Students developing familiarity with college-level writing will learn. . . • Advanced reading strategies for understanding multiple, complex readings. • Analyzing course texts to learn how writers use ideas and information to build new knowledge in a field. • How to read, analyze, and write about multiple academic texts at the same time focusing on expressing the connections between their own thoughts about the topic and the perspectives of other writers. • About and respond to the wide variety of writing assignments they can expect to see in college courses. • Revision strategies, including how to get helpful feedback on my writing, use feedback, and independently evaluate and improve my own writing.
Lower Division Description	Students who are ready to conduct academic research and write, revise, and edit an extended research article will learn. . . • To use existing reading strategies to find and analyze multiple, complex academic texts. • To complete assignments that are all part of an extended research project. • The expectations of academic research writing and how to connect previous research to data collected. • Develop feedback focused on integrating sources and organizing ideas. • Understand feedback and revise.

Faculty readers used common criteria to confirm or deny students' requests (see Appendix B). Because of the issues present in the Challenge Activity demonstrated in this article and the overly simplistic view of student experience present in the survey questions, Writing Placement 2020 was replaced with a new mechanism the following year (see Burke Reifman et al.).

Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

Approximately 287 essays were produced from March to December. For this study, student essays were pulled from the four main waves of Writing Placement 2020 held in June, July, August, and September; these waves produced 183 challenge essays. The students who participated in the four main waves were most likely to be students who matriculated (did not defer or melt) in the Fall of 2020 and those who did not participate in a summer bridge program, which would have given them more education regarding the writing curriculum. Since varying numbers of student essays were submitted for the four main waves, this study randomly pulled 50% of the 183, resulting in 91 coded essays. While all 183 challenge essays were read in informal capacities, this analysis focuses on the 91 that were coded.

Demographics of Participants

Following coding, I reviewed institutionally collected demographic information to understand who participated in the challenge activity. Table 2 compares the demographics of students represented in the coded portion (n=91), the full corpus of essays (n=287), and all survey takers (n=4343). This table demonstrates that no one demographic group was overly represented in the challenge activity by more than 3%, with the exception of international (non-resident) students, who were represented slightly less (6%) than their resident peers in the Challenge Activity.

Analytic Methods

Essays in this study were qualitatively coded to understand patterns of evidence used to justify placement. First, once essays were selected and anonymized, I read essays to develop a set of descriptive codes (Miles and Huberman), created to address specific forms of evidence, mentions of resources, and to characterize "the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (Saldaña 87). These 48 codes were then organized under four parent codes. With a finalized codebook (see Appendix C), each of the 91 essays were coded by two separate readers (the author and the director of the program) who

Table 2. Demographics of Challenge Participants*

	All Survey Takers (N=4343)	All Essays (N=287)	Coded Essays (N=91)
First Gen	42%	45%	37%
Not First Gen	58%	55%	63%
Female	62%	63%	55%
Non-Binary	>1%	>1%	>1%
Male	38%	37%	45%
African American	4%	4%	7%
American Indian	>1%	1%	0%
Chinese	29%	29%	26%
East Indian	7%	5%	9%
Filipino	5%	5%	9%
Japanese	1%	1%	0%
Korean	2%	>1%	>1%
Latinx	5%	7%	4%
Mexican	22%	19%	18%
None Listed	2%	>1%	>1%
Other Asian	4%	6%	5%
Vietnamese	5%	7%	8%
White	14%	14%	13%
Resident	70%	76%	79%
Non-Resident	30%	24%	21%

*Demographic Categories from UC Davis Registrar Report; Resident means domestic student and Non-Resident means international student.

later met for code rectification using a spreadsheet to document code agreement. Finally, I consulted the frequency of each code to better understand prevailing themes.

FINDINGS

Many of the 91 coded essays were 1-2 double-spaced pages where students would enact different school-based genres (e.g. five-paragraph essays, three-point theses, etc.). Below are representative excerpts from 12 of the 91 coded essays along with descriptions of the student writers in terms of first-generation status, sex, race, and residential status pulled from the University's database. Importantly, the speakers, whose identities were drawn on only after analysis, are not overly representative of any historically disenfranchised identity (e.g. first-generation status, gender/sex, race/ethnicity, and residential status), suggesting a broad representation of students who rejected the basic writer label. Of these 12 essays, only 1 was denied by faculty readers for movement out of an entry-level writing class, meaning the 11 others were successful in using the kinds of evidence described as a means of moving out of basic writing.

Overall, 67% (n=61) of challenge essays were coded with "Identifies Class as Remedial, Basic, Abnormal, etc.," which captured the ways students spoke about the basic writing courses or the kinds of students who might occupy these courses. Many of the excerpts in this code suggest that basic writing is not challenging, that it could be a hindrance to their progress, that it is redundant content, and so on. Implicit in these arguments is the way students envision basic writing classes and themselves in relation to that course and who they believe occupies basic writing or basic writing courses. Further, these excerpts reveal how students see their Academic Possible Selves (APS) as deeply at odds with their placement, suggesting the complexity of choice in placement, particularly when the burden of labor and proof is placed on the students alone.

Basic Writing as Damaging

A common theme in coding were damage-centered narratives around placement in basic writing. Specifically, students associated placement in a basic writing course as something that would negatively impact their progress as a student, associating the placement with a lack of growth and a detriment to their future as students. As one student commented: "Taking a course to satisfy the entry-level writing requirement will let me feel

trapped or stuck because I know I'm capable of more specific and challenging courses" (*Incoming, First-Generation, Female, East Indian, Resident Student*). Many of the students who argued against their placement in basic writing asserted that, despite their lack of experience with the classes, the content would be repetitive and therefore prevent them from growing: "I do not believe that being taught similar and repetitive content will be much help to grow as a writer. Taking an entry-level writing class can then potentially hinder the opportunity I need to develop as a better writer. . ." (*Incoming, First-Generation, Female, Chinese, Resident Student*). Others also commented that being placed in a basic writing class would be missing an opportunity, suggesting that the placement was closing off some route to their desired APS. For this student, this became a moment of opportunity in reclaiming their vision of their future academic self: "I do not believe that I should be re-introduced to core academic literature and literacies. I may have missed satisfying the entry-level writing requirement, but I will not miss the opportunity to be integrated in classes that challenge my abilities as a writer" (*Incoming, Non-First-Generation, Male, African American, Resident Student*). The students reject the deficit narrative associated with the basic writing label, using this moment of choice to counter the label of "entry-level" placed on them by the institution.

Basic Writing as Regression

Other excerpts show students describing basic writing courses as repetitions of high school. As one student argued: "If I were placed into a course to fulfill basic writing, in which its main goal is to develop my writing and critical thinking skills, I suspect I will gain very little from it because I have already acquired these skills from my high school English courses" (*Incoming, Non-First-Generation, Male, Ethnicity Unknown, Resident Student*). In fact, their graduation from high school is proof that this placement is incorrect: "I mastered everything there is to learn in the entry-level writing pathway by the time I was a sophomore in high school and have a strong grasp on the tasks and challenges that the English Composition pathway provides since I graduated high school" (*Incoming, First-Generation, Male, Mexican, Resident Student*).

These students are reminding their reader that their past selves have been successful in what they see as the same content and, to them, basic writing courses represent high school level material. This does not match with their future academic selves, who are college ready, unlike the students

who truly belong in basic writing classes: "I do not mean to undermine the entry-level students, but I believe that it would not be the right place for me. The way I see it is the entry-level writing classes are the college preparatory classes in high school and the English Composition Pathway is the advanced class" (*Incoming, Non-First-Generation, Male, Vietnamese, Resident Student*). Here, students create a firm line between the perception of prepared, admitted college students and students who are placed into basic writing courses and are therefore perceived to be underprepared, conditionally admitted students. Again, they firmly reject the label of the institution.

Basic Writers as Less Literate

Many students asserted that they didn't belong in a basic writing course because they were in fact "literate" and ready to learn at a "higher level." For example, this student describes their placement as a fundamental mismatch to their literacy skills: "The entry-level class that I am placed in is not the best fit for me as I believe my skill sets allow me to continue learning at a higher level...I feel that the result is not representative of my English literacy" (*Incoming, Non-First-Generation, Female, Chinese, Resident Student*). These excerpts are more loaded in their implications and reveal the ways in which the mark of a basic writer was associated with a student who might be less capable or even intelligent and less linguistically proficient. By being placed in a basic writing class, students believe they would need to prove their literacy skills: "There are several writings from my Senior English class that demonstrate my literacy" (*Incoming, Non-First-Generation, Male, White, Resident Student*). For many of these students, this was unreasonable as their literate selves have already been verified by outside benchmarks: "My research and literacy abilities were approved and reviewed by the College Board" (*Incoming, First-Generation, Male, Mexican, Resident Student*). While there was no mention of the word literacy or literate in the survey, nor in the student learning outcomes students could access online, these excerpts demonstrate another line drawn by challenge essay writers: literate students are prepared for "college-level" work and sanctioned by outside parties.

Basic Writing as Contingent Acceptance

Finally, while each of the excerpts above point to issues of conditional acceptance, the following are excerpts which detail the way students see their acceptance to an elite university as direct evidence of their ability to be in a first-year composition course: "It would be absolutely useless to try

and place in a course that is not meant for my level of understanding, but that is exactly why I need to be placed in lower division course: it is the ideal next step for me as an incoming Freshman at UC Davis" (*Incoming, First-Generation, Female, African American, Resident Student*). Here, the rupture between how students envision their future academic selves and their placement in basic writing courses is most evident: their acceptance to a selective university means they cannot be a basic writer, and placement in a basic writing class means their full acceptance to the institution has been questioned. As one student commented regarding their placement: "Only then, would it be fair for students to be able to be placed in a proper class by an extraordinary prestigious institution" (*Incoming, First-Generation, Male, Mexican, Resident Student*).

For many students, acceptance into an elite institution is proof they do not need basic writing, and placement in this class then suggests a contingency of their acceptance. Why would they come to a highly sought-after institution if they wanted an easy class for incapable students who attend lesser universities? As this student commented, "I did not come to UC Davis to take the easy way out. I applied because this university can push me to be the best I can be. I'm sure that I can do better than the course I'm currently placed into" (*Incoming, First-Generation, Female, Asian, Resident Student*). The very notion that they would seek out this university, be accepted, and then be told they needed basic writing was a disruption in their plans as a student. Again, students push against the idea that they have been conditionally accepted by the institution.

DISCUSSION

While the Challenge Essays from Writing Placement 2020 were diverse in their approaches and constructions, common themes demonstrate interesting issues with having students argue against a particular placement. Specifically, it's important to note that much of the language in this analysis (basic, literate, etc.) *did not* appear on the survey or any of the limited introductory information and instead came from students' perceptions of the placement. Indeed, even the university's basic writing class is referred to as "entry-level writing" across the institution, avoiding these language constructions. Students in this study were arguing out of placement in a "entry-level"/basic writing course and into a "lower-division"/ first-year writing courses, arguing for fulfillment, for one less class, and for a more whole sense of self. Positioned as future college students and past high school

students, students drew on negative perceptions of basic writing, their past selves, and their APSs to support their argument. Their choice was colored by common tropes around basic writing as deficit-based and othering, which deeply conflicted with how they saw themselves as students. With this in mind, I argue that the evidence revealed that placement in a basic writing course caused a disruption in students' future academic selves as their APS was deeply misaligned with their recommended placement, suggesting a complicating factor for relying on student choice in placement.

As is evident in the excerpts, students arguing against placement in basic writing classes perceive their placement in the course as regression. As students accepted into an elite institution, they perceived their future selves as prepared for advanced college-level coursework and that anything else was an impediment to their momentum as students. For them, basic writing meant repetition of high school content, time spent on learning skills they already possessed, and damage to their progress. How can they be their ideal academic possible selves (APS), embedded in college and expanding if they are "miss(ing) the opportunity to be integrated in classes that challenge my abilities as a writer?" Placement in this class means a lack of "growth" and a "waste of time"; acts that are antithetical to the behaviors of high achieving students. If a student's future self is high achieving, growing, developing, then placement in a basic writing class suggests a disruption in that self to students. In this case, their understanding of basic writing did lend to a simple choice between classes. Despite never experiencing a basic writing course at UC Davis, they were sure they would only be harmed by it.

It was no mistake that challenge essay writers spent time reminding their readers that they were in fact fully admitted into an "extraordinary prestigious institution." Because they "did not come to UC Davis to take the easy way out," their placement in a basic writing course was fundamentally wrong; the challenge essay activity and the placement tradition it embodies required students to advocate yet again for their sanctioned space in the university, reminding their reader that they have already been accepted, a common issue in placement (Poe et al.). Their recommended survey placement did not match against how they saw themselves as an accepted student at an elite institution. Their admissions, it seems, were already proof that they did not need placement in a basic writing class. Through the lens of APS, these claims, which were common in the challenge essays, can be seen as a rupture in who they believed their future student to be at an elite institution. They speak to the troubling narrative around placement in basic writing as simply the difference between "college-ready" and "academically

underprepared" (Toth 4). In this case, the students could not possibly need an entry-level class because this meant their admission to the university was flawed. This deficit-based perception cannot be separated from issues of race that basic writing scholars have noted. Indeed, while identities of the speakers here varied, it's important to note that an automated placement in a basic writing course may have layered stigma onto students of color, who may have already been experiencing fear of conditional acceptance.

The fracture runs so deeply against how students perceive themselves they even feel the need to remind us that they are in fact literate and that this literacy has already been sanctioned by outside parties. The students who employed this language are suggesting, in some ways, that placement in a basic writing class signifies a lack of literacy, which for them is an impossibility based on their past selves' experiences. Their future self is more than literate; it is college literate, and that has been verified by other assessments. Often, students in the challenge essays would cite success with AP and SATs as the only reason one could need to see they were beyond basic writing courses, despite growing evidence that participation in advanced high school coursework is not evidence of preparedness for college-level writing courses (Hall). While this is unsurprising based on the way test scores are often used to move students out of basic writing courses, the idea that placement in a basic writing course "is not representative of my English literacy" suggests another fracture in their perceived future self. Their APS, progressing and growing in college, is without a doubt not in need of literacy remediation, as literacy is a fixed concept that they no longer need to develop; they use their past self-experiences to locate basic writing as a space of illiteracy and distance themselves from it. This deeply reflects the "basic" vs. "normal" dichotomy that Melzer and others have named and further complicates the choice to place into a basic writing class.

IMPLICATIONS

Viewing these excerpts in the light of APSs is especially important when basic writing scholars consider that possible selves "reflect the extent to which the self is socially determined and constrained" (Markus and Nurius 954). Much like the research that reflects student's negative dispositions toward their basic writing class, the perspectives captured in the challenge essays are reflective of the broad narrative around remediation that the field has worked against for decades. For placement, these findings have deep implications for forcing the burden of labor and proof of "college-

preparedness" on students themselves. In these moments of frustration and disappointment around their placement in a basic writing course, the students employ the rhetoric of "bonehead" English, where students in the class are 'dumb' or 'not trying' and the work is a 'waste of time' (Bachman 18). Student arguments not only reflect the tropes basic writing instructors and scholars hear about remediation, tropes that are historically embedded in issues of basic writing as the home of students of color, but use these tropes for self-advocacy, demonstrating the problem with leaving students alone and singularly responsible for the labor of placement.

These reactions are the result of the disruption of a student's future academic self—the one that is successful, forward moving, college-ready, and achieving. The arguments that students used to demonstrate their preparedness for a first-year composition course were laden with emotion, frustration, and the sense that they had been wronged. Again, students of color may have experienced this wrong two-fold due to the connotations of placement. For many students in this study, this placement was in direct opposition to how they saw their college experience and themselves as students; this placement disrupted who they believed their future academic self would be, particularly after their acceptance to an elite institution. The disruption is the result of asking students to again prove their admittance to the university, and in some cases, might reflect the problematic nature of basic writing being conflated with not only intelligence but also non-white student bodies. Since being labeled a basic writer came with so many negative connotations, this was no choice for students. It was, instead, an imperative act of self-preservation to argue their way out of basic writing.

By viewing these placements through the lens of Academic Possible Selves basic writing scholars can see the importance of this placement moment as identity forming, which may explain why research in placement suggests that students are more confident and have higher senses of self-efficacy when they get to choose their class and align their course with their future academic self (Aull). In many ways, this is further evidence that student choice in placement is crucial to self-efficacy, as it is then identity affirming, rather than dismissing. Further, this suggests that choice in placement and how that choice is presented is also extremely complicated as it is both deeply personal and highly contextual, depending on past experiences, models of APSs available to an individual, and social context. In this case, choice is not a binary. It is not simply, "I need support/time/instruction, or I don't." It is a social and political choice that impacts identity and formations of self, which may be further compounded by marginalized identities that

students occupy. These complications in choice are reflected in other work around self-placement that acknowledges the difficulties in encouraging self-reflection in students (Schendel and O'Neill), particularly as they connect past experiences with future writing situations (Gere et al.); however, the extent to which the field considers choice and reflection as an act mediated through negative perceptions of remediation and the identities associated with it is limited.

Plainly, for students, choice comes with competing values. Indeed, only 6% of students who had the chance to challenge their placement chose to do so. This begs the need for more research around what choice means to students, who feels welcome to choose, and how APSs, a framework which suggests that students from lower socioeconomic, non-dominant linguistic, and minoritized backgrounds may have less positive views of their future selves, may play into placement practices. It's clear that the students from this sampling had a strong sense of their APSs, and they felt in a position to advocate for their particular vision of their future self.

Of course, outright rejection of the basic writing label was not the strategy of every student who participated in the challenge activity. There were several examples of students who suggested that while they thought they could excel in a first-year composition course, they were not surprised to be labeled as in need of more preparation, which may reflect other research on APSs and how they are formed and conditioned over time (Kerpelman and Pittman; Oysterman and Fryberg). Then, there were the thousands of students who the writing placement team never heard from, who accepted their placement whether happily or not. These students may or may not have experienced this type of conflict; only more research on the socially mediated nature of choice in placement will reveal larger trends. These concerns, among others around the placement mechanism from 2020, prompted us to substantially revise this placement process, emphasizing removing the burden of labor from students and distributing the difficulty of choice across stakeholders (see Burke Reifman et al.).

Basic writing scholars, in their mission to support students and acclimate them to writing in higher education contexts and ensure equitable placement in basic writing courses, must contend with how APSs play into students' participation in self-placement models. The variety of self-placement presented here, an impersonal automatic placement that relied on the labor of students in changing it, is one element of self-placement that should be reconsidered in the light of this evidence. Indeed, as legislation works to push self-placement as a panacea to inequitable placement,

understanding choice, as mediated by social stigma around remediation, which is compounded by issues of race, will become imperative in truly delivering equitable placement in writing courses. Namely, the field must push against the notion that universities render placement neutral by relying solely on student choice.

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APPENDIX A

Writing Placement 2020 Challenge Activity Introductory Page & Essay Prompt

Welcome to the Writing Placement 2020 Challenge Activity!

This is your opportunity to collaborate with UC Davis faculty in determining the most appropriate first writing course for you.

Your goal in this challenge activity will be to write an essay that makes an argument for what you believe is a better writing placement for you than the one you received through the Writing Placement 2020 survey. An outline of the challenge process is below.

Challenge activity description:

- The challenge activity consists of **two assignments** you must complete:
    1. Select and upload a recent example of your own academic writing (within the last academic year) that represents your current abilities as a writer.
    2. Write and upload the challenge essay that argues for the writing placement that you believe best aligns with your writing abilities and knowledge.
- You have **7 days** to complete both of these assignments.
- Detailed instructions about each assignment will become available when your challenge wave period begins.
- The assignments can be accessed by clicking on the "Assignments" tab on the left side of this screen.
- You will receive your results via email from writingplacement@ucdavis.edu.

If you experience technical issues with Canvas during your 7-day challenge period, please email us your materials by the challenge deadline at writingplacement@ucdavis.edu.

Before you begin:

- Read about the pathways and courses available to new first-year students at the writing placement website ⬀ . This information can be used as evidence for your argument in the challenge essay.
- Locate, reread, and upload an example of your own academic writing from within the last academic year.
- Read the instructions for both assignments in this challenge carefully once they are available to you.

Both your writing sample and the challenge essay will be read and assessed by UC Davis writing faculty. After we review your writing we will issue your final placement results. Placement results issued through the challenge activity are final and cannot be challenged again.

If you have concerns or questions during the 7-day challenge period, please contact us at writingplacement@ucdavis.edu.

WP 2020 May Wave: Upload your Challenge Essay

Due Jun 5, 2020 by 5pm   **Points** 0   **Submitting** a file upload   **File Types** doc, docx, pdf, rtf, and txt
Available until Jun 5, 2020 at 5pm

This assignment was locked Jun 5, 2020 at 5pm.

Instructions: You will be writing a short essay that makes an argument about what writing placement is best for you. This essay should include clear and well supported reasons for your chosen writing placement.

We recommend that you collect and consider the following information as potential supporting evidence for your argument:

- what you know about yourself as a writer of academic English
- what you know about the course(s) in the pathway/placement you were assigned
- What you know about the course(s) in the placement you believe you should have.

Task: Write an essay of around 300 words that makes an argument, supported by evidence, about the best writing placement for you. Once you have written, revised, and proofread your essay upload the final document here within Canvas before the deadline.

Criteria: UC Davis writing faculty will review your essay and make our decision based on how well your essay demonstrates:

- A clear and focused argument
- Use of appropriate evidence to support that argument
- Purposeful organization of ideas
- Clearly indicate when using sources
- Appropriate language and tone for an academic audience
- Sentence-level clarity.

APPENDIX B

Challenge Scoring Guide

Challenge Activity Scoring Process
Step 1: Read the challenge response.
Step 2: Mark Criteria 1 YES or NO.
Step 3: Mark Criteria 2 YES or NO

Both are YES: Challenge accepted	Both are NO: Challenge denied	Split: Consult writing sample **Step 4**: Read Writing Sample. Mark Criteria 3 YES or NO If YES: Challenge accepted. If No: Challenge denied.

Challenge Activity Scoring Rubric

CRITERIA	Evaluation
1. Clear Placement Argument?	◦ Yes ◦ No
2. Appropriate Evidence?	◦ Yes ◦ No
• Both Criteria 1 and 2 are Yes? = Challenge accepted --> <u>enter score and final pathway in Box folder spreadsheet for the Wave</u> • Both Criteria 1 and 2 are No? = Challenge denied --> <u>enter socre and final pathway in Box folder spreadsheet for the Wave</u> • Split? = (continue to Writing Sample and Criteria 3)	
3. Writing sample demonstrates C or higher?	◦ If Yes, Challenge accepted --> <u>enter score and final pathway in Box folder spreadsheet for the Wave</u> ◦ If No, Challenge denied --> <u>enter score and final pathway in Box folder spreadsheet for the Wave</u>

APPENDIX C

Final Codebook

Parent Code	Child Code I	Child Code II	Definition
FEATURES OF WRITING SAMPLE			
	Content: Experiential Evidence		
		Peer Review Experience as Evidence	Student uses experience with peer review as evidence of preparedness
		"Good Student": They do Well Writing Essays	Student evokes their understanding of a high achieving, strong, and capable student as evidence.
		Grammatical/ Linguistic Proficiencies as Evidence	Student discusses proficiency with granmmar, understanding of grammar, or lack of grammatical errors as evidence.
		Awareness/ Use of US Educational System	Student uses their knowledge of colleges, programs, tests, or facets of US Education as evidence
		Uses Literature Courses/ Knowledge of Literary Conventions as Evidence	Student uses knowledge of literary conventions, experience reading or analyzing literature (fiction/non-fiction), or time in a literature class as evidence.
		Uses Non-Writing Coursework as Evidence	Student discusses experience wriitng in classes outside of English/Literature/ Language Arts. (Ex: Lab reports, papers for history class, etc.) as evidence.

		Writing Process Experience as Evidence of Writing Pre-paredness	Student discusses engagement in the writing process (invention, drafting, revising, etc.) as evidence.
	Content: Knowledge Acquired through Research as Evidence		
		Details about Different UCD Courses as Evidence	Student uses information about different pathways/courses
		Names UCD Course: BW 7	Student specifically names course.
		Names UCD Course: BW1A	Student specifically names course.
		Names UCD Course: NAS5	Student specifically names course.
		Names UCD Course: ENL3	Student specifically names course.
		Names UCD Course: 3A	Student specifically names course.
	Style/Approaches to Writing and in the Writing		
		Language Interferes with Meaning/ Comprehension of Essay	The writing is difficult to understand; not just grammatical errors, but errors that interfere with meaning.
		Features of Standardized Writing	Student uses structures, styles, or organization patterns found in high-stakes testing situations (five paragraph essays, 3-point thesis, narrative introduction, etc.)

		Addresses or Acknowledges Faculty as Audience	Student outwardly addresses their reader.
		Use of Citations/Quotes from Sources	Student employs a direct quote or cites an outside source.
EXPRESSIONS OF THE STUDENT			
		Frustration with Previous Educational/Life Experience	Student expresses frustration/has an emotional response to a past event in their education or personal lives.
		Believes Test Scores Fulfill BWR Status	Student reports that they believe their test scores, once submitted to admissions, will fulfill their ELWR status.
		Argues for BWR Fulfillment Despite Test Scores	Student will argue that although their test scores do not technically fulfill their ELWR status, their scores are "close enough"/"good enough" and should fulfill their requirement.
		Identifies ALWR as "Remedial," "Basic," or "Abnormal"	Student may infer or claim that ELW courses are too slow, redundant, for the unskilled/unintelligent, etc.
		Self-Efficacy as Evidence of Writing Preparedness	Student expresses a strong confidence in their ability to do the work in their desired class.

	ENGAGEMENT WITH PLACEMENT PROCESS		
	Frustration (Emotions) over WP2020 Process/ Results	Student expresses frustration, anger, etc. over their engagement in the WP2020 process.
	Confusion over WP2020 Results or Process	Student details their confusion about some aspect of the WP2020 experience.
	Critique of the Placement Mechanism	Student will critique some aspects of WP2020, offer alternative methods of assessment.
	Argued for Same Path Placement	Student reaffirms their path placement.
	Mentions Discussion with Advisor Had or Desired	Student mentions advisor.
	Misunderstands Purpose of the Essay	Student uses the challenge essay for an alternative purpose.
SELF-REPORTED FEATURES OF THE STUDENT			
	Academic Features		
		Academic Success as Evidence of Writing Preparedness	Student Describes their high grades, honors classes, overall academic achievements, and so on as evidence of writing preparedness.
		Discusses Test Anxiety/ Trouble	Student details the stress, anxiety, etc. they experience with tests as evidence.
		Discusses CC or 4-Year Experience	Student points to experience in a college-level course as evidence of writing preparedness.

		Lack of Access to Resources	Student describes a lack of access to some element that would have aided in their success (Ex: Quiet place to study, access to AP tests, etc.).
		Self-Identified International Student	Student identifies as International Student
	Language Identity		
		Misplaced in ML Class	Student identifies misplacement in Multilingual class; they don't identify as multilingual.
		Monolinguistic	Student identifies as monolingual. Often accompanied with other demographic information.
		Multilingual, But English is Primary Language	Student identifies as multilingual but is comfortable using English/identifies English as their primary language.