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PILOTING THE COMPASS E-WRITE SOFTWARE AT JACKSON STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Teri T. Maddox

Placement issues are a major concern in higher education. Many states require students who do not have college-level scores on entrance exams such as the ACT or SAT to take precollege developmental classes. Without reliable placement testing, students may be put into classes that are too easy for them and become bored, or worse, they may be put into classes too hard for them and drop out because they don't think they are "college material." Correct placement should mean that students are put into appropriate classes for their ability level so that they will be properly challenged and supported. In short, higher education needs a system of writing placement that is able to measure student ability both efficiently and reliably so that students take appropriate classes. Finding a system that meets all our requirements, however, is not easy. A sign in a downtown business says, "Cheap, Quick, Excellent—Pick Any Two." Jackson State Community College was looking for a writing-placement test that would be quick, cheap, and reliable, but like the business sign, it does not seem that it is possible to have all three.

Jackson State Community College has an enrollment of approximately four thousand, serving fourteen mostly rural counties outside the Memphis metropolitan area. It is a member of the Tennessee Board of Regents, which includes fourteen community colleges and five universities. The system uses ACT English subscores to place students in writing classes. Students who make a 14 and below are enrolled in Basic Writing, which is a sentence to paragraph course; students who score 15–18 are enrolled in Developmental Writing, which is a paragraph to essay course; and students who score a 19 are enrolled in college-level English composition, Comp I.

The board of regents encourages institutions to allow students additional placement opportunities. Jackson State Community College has tried several different placement methods. The first method we used

was to require all basic and developmental writing students to write a diagnostic essay the first week of class. If their writing sample was judged to be strong enough by at least two full-time English faculty, students were able to move up a class level. A few students each semester did move up a level, whether from Basic to Developmental Writing or from Developmental Writing to Comp I. However, trying to rearrange those students' class schedules was difficult because classes were often full, so the students' entire schedule had to be changed. A more serious problem with this system was that by the time students had written the essay, the essays had been reviewed, and the students had been given new schedules, they had missed over a week of class. Since they were borderline students to begin with, this system did not seem to give them the best chance to succeed. The process seemed awkward and unfair, so the English department looked for alternatives.

The second placement method we tried was using the COMPASS writing test, an ACT product and much like the ACT English test except the COMPASS is untimed and computerized. We liked the idea that the test is untimed because many students do much better when allowed to complete a test at their own pace, especially nontraditional students. We also liked the idea of the computerized test because it is adaptive; that is, it adjusts the order of questions according to student answers. If a student answers a question correctly, he or she is taken down a different path than a student who answers the question incorrectly. Unfortunately, like the ACT English test, the COMPASS writing test seemed to be more of a revising test than a composition test because there is no actual writing involved; both are indirect tests of writing, and students still choose from multiple-choice options. Our English faculty wanted a test that would directly measure actual essay writing, so we were not completely satisfied with the COMPASS writing test either.

Jackson State Community College had been using COMPASS for five years when ACT publicized its new computer grading software, e-Write. According to ACT product information (2003), electronic scoring is

- fast—The samples are scored and the reports produced within seconds to allow immediate feedback and advising.
- reliable—Research demonstrates close agreement between electronically generated scores and those assigned by expert human raters.
- affordable—For information, contact your nearest ACT office (www.act.org/e-write/).

Students are given a prompt (one of six) and asked to type a multiple-paragraph essay. Institutions can set a time limit for the writing if they choose. Students submit the essay, and it is graded in seconds with an overall score between 2 and 8. In addition, the computer will also score the essay in five different areas: focus, content, organization, style, and mechanical conventions, on a 1–4 scale.

It looked like using e-Write would be a good solution for us. First, we could test students before the semester began so they would be more likely to be placed in the appropriate class at the beginning of the semester. Second, students would be writing an actual essay and not choosing multiple-choice answers. Third, results would be virtually instantaneous, so students could test, receive their scores, and immediately complete a class schedule. Finally, the cost was realistic. In fact, it would cost us about the same to use e-Write as it would to rely on trained holistic graders. Therefore, the software looked like we could say, "Cheap, Quick, Excellent—Have All Three."

The English department voted to pilot the e-Write software for three testing periods, before spring, summer, and fall semesters in 2003. Following ACT suggestions, we required students to take both the COMPASS writing test and e-Write, which gave them a combined writing score. Students took the COMPASS writing test first, which was untimed, and then we decided to give them a time limit of two hours to complete the e-Write topic. The cutoff scores for the combined writing test results had to be the same as the already standardized COMPASS scores set by the Tennessee Board of Regents to allow for transferability and continuity: Basic Writing, 1–28; Developmental Writing, 29–67; and Comp I, 68–99.

Challenge Day is an opportunity Jackson State gives students before each semester to try to raise their placement level. Students pay $20 and may take math, reading, and/or writing-placement tests, depending on their placement. We used the e-Write for writing, the Nelson-Denny for reading, and the COMPASS for math. (Students who have a grade in a class are not allowed to challenge that class; they must retake the class to replace the grade.) The testing went smoothly in spring and summer, but the number of students tested was low; only fourteen in spring and twenty-four in summer tested for writing so we did not have a good feel for the success of the computer program. We did have some concern since a higher percentage of students tested up a level in writing than did so in reading and math, but we wanted to wait and see what would happen with

FIGURE 1

Percentage of students who successfully tested out of their DSP classes
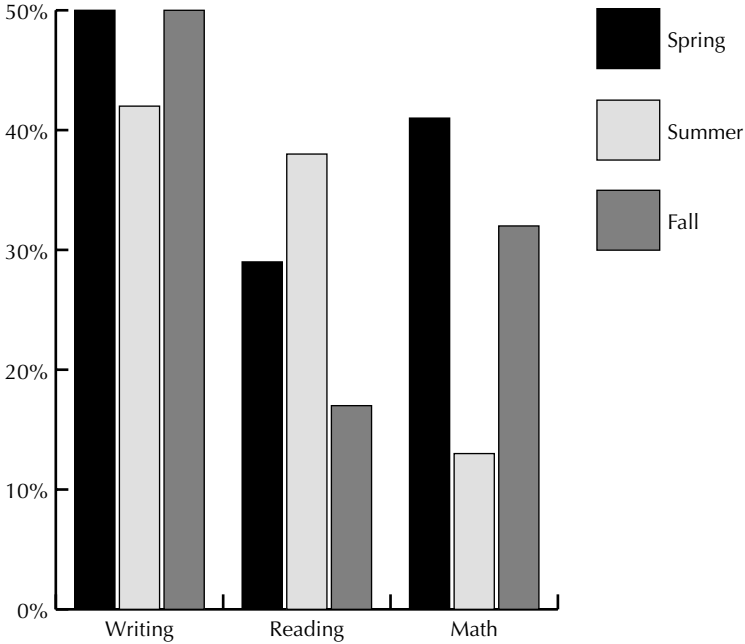
a larger student population. The figure above depicts the differences in the percentages testing up a level in writing, reading, and math.

The main event came in the fall semester of 2003, when 107 students showed up at Challenge Day to try to improve their writing placement. We experienced several problems on that day with e-Write. It did not seem to live up to our expectations, especially in the areas where the advertisement promised "fast" and "reliable" results.

Our first concern was that thirty-five students did not get immediate results. One of the reasons we were interested in e-Write was because it would give us quicker results than would human readers. However, twenty-nine scores arrived several hours after the testing was completed, and human readers on our campus could have scored those essays much more quickly. We never got any results at all that day from seven essays. Because those scores were so late, we had to use just the COMPASS writing score to place those students, the method we had used in the past and were trying to replace. The students whose essays were not returned on time were told that when their essay scores were returned, we would contact them if their placement had changed.

In the software instructions, ACT states that essays would not be returned immediately if they were off topic or too short. In those cases the essays would have to be read by human readers, and scores would be returned within forty-eight hours. We assumed that the late essays must have been "problem" essays, but apparently that was not the case; when the essay scores were returned, five students actually tested higher, so their essays could not have been too short or off topic. We had to notify those students to come back to campus and change their schedule—something we were tying to avoid by using a computerized scoring system. Our students often have to drive over an hour to get to campus, and these five had to make one trip to campus to take the test and then come back on another day to complete their schedules. One real advantage the computer has over human readers is speed, but the machine did not come through for us in that respect.

Our second concern was the lack of variability in the essay scores. The e-Write software scores essays between 2–8, with a score of 6 considered to be a college-level essay (www.act.org/e-write/). Seventy-nine percent of the hundred students who received a score made a 5 or a 6, which seems too narrow a range. The table below illustrates the frequency of each of the scores.

It might be argued that the students who came to test on that day were all about the same level of proficiency, so we decided to compare the above e-Write scores with the other measures of student writing that we had, which included their ACT English subscore and their COMPASS writing score. A database was created that included those two scores and the e-Write score as well as students' combined COMPASS/e-Write score, the time they spent on the COMPASS writing test and on e-Write, and whether students placed into a higher level.

The comparative data located nineteen suspicious e-Write scores, 20 percent of the tests that day: that is, instances where the e-Write score seemed high compared with the other measures of writing. For example, five students made below a 15 on the ACT and scored a 6 on the e-Write, which is college level. Since the ACT, COMPASS, and e-Write are all ACT products, we would have hoped there would be more consistency among the tests. Most troubling was a student who spent one minute on the e-Write and wrote an essay that was scored a 6.

Another concern was that as in the spring and summer testing periods, the percentage of students testing up a level on the writing test was higher than the percentage testing up on the reading and math

TABLE 1
E-Write scores (N=100)

E-Write score	Frequency
2	1
3	2
4	8
5	39
6	46
7	4
8	0

challenge tests we gave that day. We used the COMPASS math test and 32 percent of the students placed into a higher class, and we used the Nelson-Denny reading test and 17 percent tested into a higher class. With the COMPASS/E-write, 50 percent tested into a higher class. The majority of those students moved up one writing level, although five students moved up two levels, from Basic Writing to Comp I.

Our final concern about e-Write was its reliability, the most important of the key issues for us. The speediness of the results and the cost are not important at all if we can't trust the results. ACT informational material (2005) states, "Research shows strong agreement between COMPASS e-Write scores and those assigned when essays are rated by two expert readers. *100% of COMPASS e-Write scores are within one point of the reader-assigned scores. About 76% of COMPASS e-Write scores match the raters' scores exactly*" (emphasis in original). Unfortunately, ACT does not make student essays available, so we could not have the nineteen questionable essays read by our trained readers.

Consequently, the only way to adequately measure the placement accuracy was to track students through their next writing classes, so we tracked the students who had been placed in a higher class through the next four semesters. Nine students tested into Developmental Writing from Basic Writing, and of those nine, three passed Developmental Writing, a success rate of 33 percent. Four students attempted Developmental Writing and did not pass, and two students did not enroll in school at all. The four students who did not pass the class have now dropped out. So we do have to worry about their placement. Is one of the reasons they dropped out that they were placed too high?

Five students tested into college-level writing, Comp I, from Basic Writing (a move up of two levels), and of those five, two withdrew from

college, two passed with a C, and one made an F in the class and then withdrew from college, so the success rate is two out of five, or 40 percent.

Thirty-nine students tested into college-level English from Developmental Writing. Of those, twenty-four made a C or above in Comp I, a 61 percent success rate. Of those students, fourteen made Cs, and one of our worries is what those Cs mean. Were the students really prepared for Comp I and properly placed, or were they struggling just to barely make a C? Most teachers must adapt their curriculum based on the needs of their students, so did the teacher have to change the curriculum so that even misplaced students could be successful? We have no way of answering these questions, but they do remain part of the placement issues for us.

According to a study by Boylan et al. (1992), which included postremediation performance in college courses of a sample of six thousand students at 150 institutions, 91.2 percent of students who passed remedial writing classes passed their subsequent college-level English course. According to the above numbers from e-Write, the students who placed into Comp I from e-Write had a 61 percent success rate, a rate far below the national study.

I had encouraged the English department to pilot e-Write last year for our Challenge Day because I believed it would be a better alternative for us than the other methods we had tried in the past, better in terms of cost, speed, and accuracy, "Cheap, Quick, Excellent." When the English department looked at the overall results, it voted to stop using e-Write as a placement tool. The department members will be reading student essays themselves at Challenge Day, using a holistic scoring system.