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# THE ROLE OF THE WRITING COORDINATOR IN A CULTURE OF PLACEMENT BY ACCUPLACER

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*Sarah Freedman, in research carried out during the 1980s, found that holistic ratings by human raters did not award particularly high marks to professionally written essays mixed in with student productions. This indicates that there is room here for AES to improve on what raters can do.*

—Bereiter

Placement processes into college writing and developmental writing courses include diverse options. Processes include use of external exams and externally set indicators, such as SAT or ACCUPLACER scores; use of locally designed essay topics for placement that are assessed by human readers using either holistic or analytic trait measures; use of directed self-placement (Royer and Gilles 2002) or informed self-placement (Bedore and Rossen-Knill 2004); and use of electronic portfolios (Raymond Walters College 2002). Whatever process for placement an institution uses needs to align with course and program outcomes, institutional assessment outcomes, the mission of the school, and, most significantly, the needs of the students.

Historically at my small, private college, the Academic Resource Center has managed placement processes into developmental math, developmental writing, and reading courses. My role as writing coordinator (1999–present) and writing specialist (1992–1998) has required my attention to placement as well as assessment processes for the program. For placement into writing courses, I have functioned as a consultant, information manager, and judge, assisting in adjustments for possible misplacements at the end of the first week of each semester. This year, for the first time, I implemented a portfolio appeals process for placement; as part of this process, a brochure about appealing placement decisions for writing now is included in each parent’s advising folder on registration/advising days.

In most recent years, processes for checking placement have required my close attention to writing performance, including dialogue with the dean of Arts and Sciences, the director of the Academic Resources Center the vice president for Academic Affairs. My role requires dialogue with those with administrative access to information in the system's electronic database; through ongoing dialogue with the director of the center, we have attempted to adjust placement decisions by ACCUPLACER.

My role has required attention to details and management of information and engaging in dialogue with faculty members and students—thus strengthening my idealistic vision for a placement system that best represents both my college's mission and the uniqueness of each individual student. With the mission in mind, an electronic-portfolio placement system aligning with an institutional system for assessment of learning in the core program and all of the major programs seems warranted. Since this vision is not yet collectively shared by the college community, I am advocating for adjustments to placement in all cases where students, faculty members, the director of the center, or I suspect such changes may be needed.

For now, the placement system by ACCUPLACER, which allows the advisor to register the incoming student in a timely way on four or five scheduled dates, is valued by my college. For writing placement in earlier years, however, select faculty members in the English program or select staff members of the center read essays when students registered at their convenience. If two raters disagreed, a third reader read the essay. With growth at the college and expansion of programs, in 2000 a consultant group for the college recommended that placement into writing courses be determined by examining the SAT combined math and verbal scores. At that time, I argued that this indicator seemed less valid and reliable as an indicator for performance in core writing classes, but the recommendation by the external consultant for enrollment management was implemented.

In spring 2003 at my college, a new system for a more integrative approach for placement, advising, and registration on several pre-planned dates was introduced. This shift to a program for placement, advising, and registration on the same day coincided with faculty members being introduced to online registration of students through the college management of information system, Datatel. The program for placement that was introduced in 2003 was ACCUPLACER. Students whose verbal SAT scores were higher than 450 automatically placed

into the first-year composition course, English 101, Effective Writing with Computers. Since that initial exam in spring 2003, students whose SAT verbal scores are lower than 450 have been required to take the ACCUPLACER essay exam. Those students with scores lower than a 7 on the ACCUPLACER exam place into developmental writing. In retrospect, I can only surmise that the college approved ACCUPLACER with its promise of a timely management of and communication about data to facilitate placement processes, advising, and registration, and also to respond to an implied need for enrollment-management processes by the college.

The pilot use of the system for fall 2003 first-year students has warranted ongoing examination of writing from semester to semester as well as ongoing dialogue with the dean of Arts and Sciences, the vice president for Academic Affairs, and the director of the center, unlike the previous system, with only two human raters in the center and a possible third to settle differences in readings of essays. As we are engaged in the third year of ACCUPLACER for placement, I feel compelled to share this story about the need for human intervention in more timely ways for whatever placement system—but especially for placement by ACCUPLACER. My reservations about this automated essay-assessment system have centered on the need for a system of checks and balances by a human reader to be set in place *before* students receive their placement results. With the current system as well, all students ought to write a placement essay, and special arrangements need to be made for students with learning disabilities or for those with English as a second language. At present, the students who take the ACCUPLACER exam submit their essays electronically to the assessment system, virtually instantaneously receive their scores with a summary of their evaluation, print out the ACCUPLACER summary of feedback, meet with their advisor, and register online for fall classes—all on the same day. The culture of immediate results for placement, advising, and registration, while convenient for management of information by staff in the center, and even more convenient for faculty advisors, complicates the process of checking for accuracy of placement, not allowing any time for a human rater to read the essays and to verify how well the system is placing students into writing courses *before* the advising system occurs.

In the past several years, the college, with 1,710 full-time undergraduate students for fall 2004 and a 2,682 total head count for all students at all levels of instruction, has been in a dynamic state of transformation. Students from an ever-wider recruitment area find its location,

programs, and emphasis on educating the whole person attractive. As a result of rapid growth in enrollment accompanied by expansion in program offerings, ACCUPLACER seems to have satisfied a need to place a reasonable proportion of students into courses requiring remediation (CA 094 and EG 094).

The rise in enrollment shown in Table 1 forced an increase in the number of faculty members teaching developmental and core writing courses from 1992 to 2004. With such growth, the college administration has sought out more automated methods for placement and registration for incoming students, so that those faculty members also in support-service roles could attend to other time-intensive tasks such as advising more diverse students, many of whom are the first generation in their family to attend college.

While the ACCUPLACER system seems to attend to the needs of the student and advisor to complete registration in person on one of five designated registration days, the college has neglected to consider how the system sends an indirect message about writing, how the time invested in a process approach to writing is de-emphasized, and how possible misjudgments by the ACCUPLACER system could be left uncritically examined if human intervention is not in place. Moreover, the 450 SAT verbal score as a primary indicator for placement into first-year composition presents even more problems with issues of content and system validity than placement by ACCUPLACER. Royer and Gilles (2002) argue strongly for locally designed measures for placement, as “[m]ost assessment theorists agree that a placement method should be derived from the curriculum itself in order to increase its validity” (267). To ensure systemic validity, they explain, the scope of any placement process needs to be envisioned as part of “the context of the entire institution and the consequences that it creates for students” (267).

An examination of records for a number of students not succeeding in first-year composition and showing a low GPA for the first semester overall in fall 2003 and 2004 suggests that the cutoff of 450 for SAT verbal is either too low or that ACCUPLACER is not functioning properly as an indicator of placement. Some of these students, of course, may have benefited from placement into developmental writing. Research repeatedly shows that students who are placed in basic writing classes “graduate in greater numbers than students who are not required to be in basic writing programs or chose to ignore a recommendation to participate in such programs” (Matzen and Hoyt 2004, 8). Instead of the SAT and ACCUPLACER external systems for placement, I recommend

TABLE 1

*Fall enrollment numbers for first-year composition (101)  
and developmental writing (094)*

<i>Semester</i>	<i>Placement administered by the Academic Resource Center</i>	<i>Enrollment CA 094 or ENG 094</i>	<i>Enrollment CA 101 or ENG 101</i>
Fall 1992	Two human readers with a possible third	3 (4%)	64 (96%)
Fall 1996	Two human readers with a possible third	7 (1%)	97 (99%)
Fall 1999	Two human readers with a possible third	26 (1%)	235 (99%)
Fall 2000	SAT	70 (24%)	225 (76%)
Fall 2003	ACCUPLACER	56 (11%)	436 (89%)
Fall 2004	ACCUPLACER	84 (18%)	387 (82%)

a more person-centered placement by portfolios that aligns with the learning outcomes for the core writing program. While I value such a locally designed and implemented electronic-portfolio process for placement, I recognize that it will take a collective effort, involving more persons than the writing coordinator to make that kind of system for the entire college community more appealing than ACCUPLACER.

#### WHAT IS ACCUPLACER?

In the College Entrance Examination Board's brochure about ACCUPLACER (based on the IntelliMetric platform), its marketers explain how a "variety of computer-adaptive tests covering the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics . . . have been developed to create the most reliable score in the least amount of time" (College Entrance Examination Board 2001). This writing-placement test, WritePlacer *Plus*, the College Board's promotional material asserts, "is the only direct writing assessment that provides immediate feedback and scoring within a complete testing and placement system." WritePlacer *Plus* claims to evaluate the writing sample online for five features of writing: focus, development, organization, sentence structure, and mechanical conventions. The student's placement into one of various writing courses is determined by the individual college using ACCUPLACER's scores and descriptors for writing, each on the scale of 2–12. The student, shortly after completing the exam, receives a printout with scores for each of the five dimensions or features of writing as well as an overall score on a scale from 2–12 and a statement about placement into either developmental

writing or regular first-year composition. With this information, the student then meets with an advisor for placement into fall courses; the placement, advising, and registration processes occur all in one day.

#### **WHO DETERMINES THE ESSAY TOPIC FOR ACCUPLACER PLACEMENT?**

ACCUPLACER allows for colleges to select one or several essay topics already tested in its system, to determine amount of time for the essay part of the exam, and to set a passing quality score on the scale of 2–12. For the first year of ACCUPLACER placement at my college, the coordinator of first-year advising selected three topics from ACCUPLACER's repertoire and allowed students an unlimited amount of time to respond. For the second year of placement by ACCUPLACER, the director of the Academic Resource Center asked me to select a topic. I suggested one topic and set the time limit at one hour. Students with documented learning disabilities could request additional time.

#### **SPRING 2003, FOR ACADEMIC YEAR 2003–2004**

In spring 2003, I attended part of a workshop at my college delivered by representatives of the College Board who explained aspects of the ACCUPLACER system. To better understand how ACCUPLACER would work, I asked to read several sample placement essays, which the director of the center shared with me. After I rated each, she then showed me the ACCUPLACER score and assessment narrative for each trait and the overall score. Using the rating scale of 2–12, I rated each essay and from this sample set, determined that a minimum of a 7 appeared to be the reasonable standard for students at my college to place into English 101, the regular first-year composition course. One essay that I rated high, as a 10 or 11, the ACCUPLACER system had rated as an 8. This essay, I later found out, was written by one of my colleagues, a published author.

For the first round of ratings for fall 2003 placement, staff from the center set the standard for placement into our first-year composition class at a score of 6. At the time, a standard of 6 was described by WritePlacer *Plus* as follows:

This is a writing sample in which the characteristics of effective written communication are only partially formed. Statement of purpose is not totally clear, and although a main idea or point of view may be stated, continued focus on the main idea is not evident. Development of ideas by the use of specific supporting detail and sequencing of ideas may be present, but the development is incomplete or unclear. The response may

exhibit distracting errors or a lack of precision in the use of grammatical conventions, including sentence structure, word choice, usage, spelling, and punctuation. (College Entrance Examination Board 2001)

After the placement, advising, and registration process for the first group of students in spring 2003, I examined forty essays by students who placed into two of the five or so projected sections of developmental reading. From this examination of the writing of about 40 percent of students who placed into developmental reading for 2003–2004, I suggested that a score of 7 be set as the standard for placement into first-year composition. For all subsequent placement processes that spring and summer of 2003 for fall 2003 incoming students, the standard was altered to 7. The score of 7 as defined by ACCUPLACER is:

The writing sample partially communicates a message to the specified audience. The purpose may be evident but only partially formed. Focus on the main idea is only partially evident. The main idea is only partially developed, with limited supporting details. Although there is some evidence of control in the use of mechanical conventions such as sentence structure, usage, spelling, and punctuation, some distracting errors may be present. (College Entrance Examination Board 2001)

Reading a representative sample of placement essays by students who had placed into developmental reading, I identified concerns about the quality of writing in these and other select samples; based on my recommendation, the director of the center adjusted the score for placement into first-year composition from 6 to 7. Final grades in first-year composition were evidence in support of this decision: students with a score of 6 or with an SAT verbal score slightly higher than 450 received lower grades than those with a score of 7.

#### **SPRING 2004, FOR ACADEMIC YEAR 2004–2005**

A major problem with ACCUPLACER appears to be cases of misplacement, requiring administrators to spend time and effort on adjustment. For academic year 2004–2005, the process for administering the ACCUPLACER exam changed slightly to facilitate more timely adjustments for misplacement. The vice president for Academic Affairs, the dean of Arts and Sciences, the director of the center, and I agreed to add a clause about placement adjustments to the exam; this clause would justify moving a student if, for one reason or another, the placement result by ACCUPLACER was perceived by the instructor or the student

as a possible misplacement, into either first-year composition or developmental writing. A faculty member or student could initiate this dialogue about possible misplacement during the first week of instruction, requiring the writing program coordinator to examine the evidence and to respond before the end of the college's drop/add period—the Friday of the first week of instruction.

While this human intervention seemed proactive, the ACCUPLACER system, with its instantaneous delivery of feedback, appeared difficult to counteract, as its on-demand results set in motion a convenient registration process for advisors and students. It becomes difficult, though not impossible, to change schedules after the semester has started. This adjustment process, predicated on assumptions that faculty members can determine whether or not a student can accomplish the goals of first-year composition at a minimum of a C standard, adds stress to the role of the instructor. Internalizing the range of writing expectations can be quite complicated for new faculty—full-time, part-time, and adjunct—who are new to expectations for writing within the college's writing program.

As a result of this procedure, in the first week of instruction faculty members recommended that thirteen of eighty-four students be moved from a developmental writing course into a first-year composition class. After examining the essays written in class during the first week of instruction and listening to the recommendations by the faculty members, who initially discussed possible changes with students, I intervened by placing these students into several sections of first-year composition by the end of the drop/add time—the end of the first week of instruction. I discussed these possible changes with the director of the center and the dean. Yet another student, with English as a second language, who was a possible fourteenth misplacement, decided to remain in the developmental writing course. At the end of the semester, performance by these fourteen students indicated that the choices were beneficial. Many received As or Bs in first-year composition, and their overall GPAs indicated success.

While the system for placement adjustment during the first week of instruction has worked for individual students, this system in fall 2004 created slightly overcrowded teaching and learning environments for two sections of first-year composition, doing an injustice to students and faculty, moving beyond recommended class sizes in a program that values conferences, multiple revisions of drafts, and other person-centered pedagogy. While those students who moved into the first-year writing course succeeded during that semester, they were stressed by this late system for adjustment during an already anxious first week of college.



In June 2004, after another ACCUPLACER placement session for incoming fall 2004 students, I read sixty-two essays to check placement results. I identified sixteen that warranted reevaluation case by case. While the policy to adjust for possible misplacement was wise to initiate, I then recognized how waiting until the first week of instruction to adjust some obvious errors or oversights would complicate the advising and scheduling process and exhaust resources. Sixteen of sixty-two students possibly misplaced from this third or fourth group of students for placement into the first-year class seemed to me sizeable enough to warrant earlier attention by the college.

#### **SPRING 2005, FOR ACADEMIC YEAR 2005–2006**

During each phase of this process, I communicated my observations and recommendations to the administration. The current adjustment for 2005–2006 students allows me to intervene as soon as possible before, during, and after placement to adjust possible misplacement by ACCUPLACER. For the fall 2005 class, after I read seventy-eight essays from that group, the director of center and I identified seventeen students to contact about their placement results by ACCUPLACER. I contacted the students, asked about their experiences with writing in high school, described the expectations for each course, and adjusted most of their schedules to either first-year composition or developmental writing. Each possible case of misplacement needs to be discussed with the student, so that changes in the schedule can be made before the next group of summer-placement students register for sections of courses that might soon meet enrollment limits.

At this time, the placement system seems to need more human oversight before advising and registration. Adjustments to schedules after the semester starts, even if these adjustments are for only ten students, require reconsideration of several already carefully designed plans—students with special needs have predetermined special advisors; students in certain intended majors, too, have advisors in those majors. If too much time lapses, or if students are placed into several special advising programs with a designated first-year advisor or placed into some writing or advising courses by intended major, adjustments to placement into writing could disrupt already carefully planned programs; disrupting relationships already established for first-year students seems to create another kind of dilemma for persons and programs. In short, any adjustments to schedules for students who possibly have been misplaced may take a great deal of time and readjustment on the part of all involved.

To address some of these issues, for 2005–2006 the director of the center, the vice president for Academic Affairs, the dean of Arts and Sciences, and I approved a new procedure for an appeals process that can be initiated by a student or the writing coordinator before a student's arrival on campus for the fall semester. Also, if a student submits samples of writing showing why placement may be inaccurate, the writing coordinator can examine the case and make appropriate changes. The writing coordinator, also, can initiate a change based upon examination of the ACCUPLACER writing sample, and/or any submitted evidence of a student's writing competence after a dialogue with the student. While these processes after placement and registration seem complicated and time intensive, for now they integrate the essential aspect of human oversight for part of the placement program (excluding possible misplacements by SAT criteria).

Human intervention is essential in placement processes, as it reflects the intended mission of my college. Instead of the ACCUPLACER system, I recommend a locally designed and implemented electronic-portfolio placement system, one that would value the following human interactions, which are more valid: for placement submissions, human raters who teach in the specific writing program; faculty and coordinator of writing designing local survey questions to assess the student's orientation to a process approach to writing; human raters in the writing program assessing a student's response to a locally designed topic on an issue related to the college's annual values-based theme. This kind of system, aligned with an institutionwide portfolio system for learning, would seem more purposeful and valid, more intentional and instrumental for measuring growth of each learner from placement through select performances in the core program and into the major program.

As the institution grapples with assessment outcomes, faculty members and administrators need to consider greater issues about assessments in relation to the mission of the college. Such an institutionwide system, which could align with the college's mission and values to respect the uniqueness of each student and to promote healthy relationships, would also need to relate to placement processes.

Such systems do exist, empowering human raters and fostering negotiation with the student about placement decisions. Such online portfolio-placement systems provide useful baseline information for measurement of individual growth in writing, orientation to the values of a college and, overall, stimulus for the growth of a student writer as a reflective learner. Small-college programs, such as the one that I

coordinate, probably would improve their courses, their core program, and their major programs by examining placement processes and asking, how do all processes align? How do placement processes, course outcomes assessment, core program outcomes assessment, and major program outcomes assessments relate?

## CONCLUSIONS

With each administration of the ACCUPLACER system, I wonder about students' first impressions of literate practices at the college and about methods for the advisor to examine complex information about the student for course selection and placement. In a college culture that already has in place an evolving portfolio system for measuring end-of-semester writing competence, I wonder whether students receive some mixed messages about ACCUPLACER placement, with its instantaneous response and assessment, in contrast to the program that they will experience, a program that values conferences, revisions, peer reviews, and other time-intensive interpersonal communication processes. The ACCUPLACER placement process presents a contradiction of sorts. The analysis of an essay by computer-assisted assessment shows that expediency is valued. Compare this to the pedagogy valued in our writing courses: the end-of-semester writing assessments with teams of professional readers, analyzing the quality of essays and sample portfolios for a range of performance from nonpassing quality to excellence. While these end-of-semester processes occur regularly each semester, the initial impression of writing at the college since the inception of placement by ACCUPLACER would suggest something quite different for incoming students and their parents or guardians, who also are present on the days of placement and registration.

If my understanding of the mission of my college is correct—respect for the individual, care and concern for others, to name just two of its core values—then a placement system that values the person's writing for a purpose would seem to require a human reader. Fostering this relationship through dialogue *from the outset* would seem preferable for placement processes. By having ACCUPLACER read and rate the placement essays, the college, perhaps unwittingly, sends a message about the value of what the student may be telling us in writing—not just how he or she writes but also what he or she values and believes.

Rather than the ACCUPLACER system, I would recommend for my college, or any other such small college, an electronic-portfolio placement and assessment system, similar to that at Raymond Walters College

at the University of Cincinnati (2002). This kind of locally developed system aligns well with a program that values faculty members' insights about reading students' placement essays and interpreting other indicators for the most appropriate placement into a college's core and developmental writing programs. Much more could be measured about students' understandings of values if one or two carefully developed locally designed placement essays could be instituted. At my college this dream for values-driven placement seems possible, as the college has been piloting electronic portfolios in select major programs, and a system for portfolio assessment of learning is one of the recommendations of the 2004–2005 core program self-study.

While this narrative does not detail for the reader a core writing program with its own carefully developed assessment systems, its own faculty-developed internal documents for feedback and assessment, its own mini-resources for shared units of inquiry in first-year composition that integrate well with the college's overall theme each year, its ongoing faculty development workshops for those who teach writing, its numerous collaborative activities with faculty and staff in the Academic Resource Center, its truly caring staff in the center and the dedicated faculty scholars in the writing program, I hope to have shown the importance of situating the human factor in any placement procedure, but especially in an automated system for placement such as ACCUPLACER. For any placement process to work the writing coordinator needs to communicate, collaborate, mediate, manage information, research, and judge. Most importantly, the writing program coordinator needs to advocate for systems, in this case, a placement system for writing that values time and respects the dignity of all persons involved in the placement process and that aligns with other mission-driven assessments for the writing program in the context of a core program and all other major programs.

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